

MARCH 1998



# interZone

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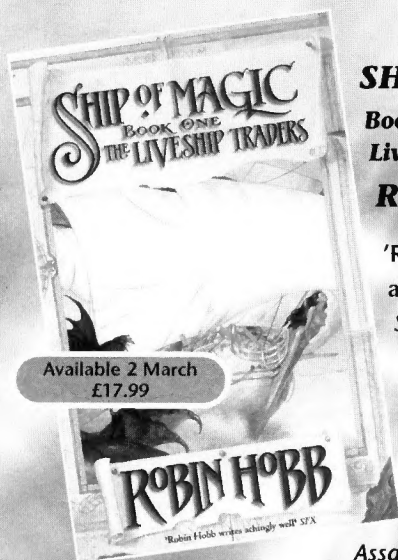
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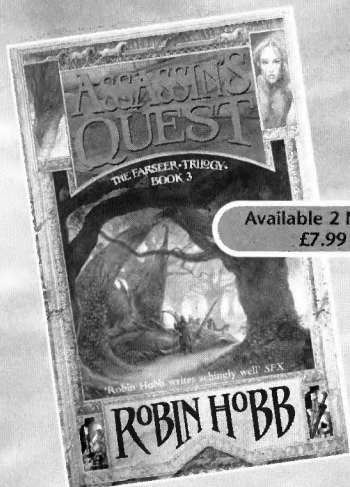
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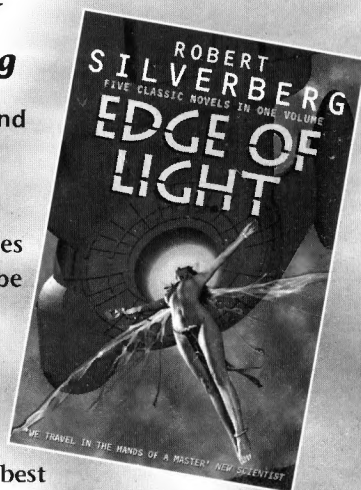
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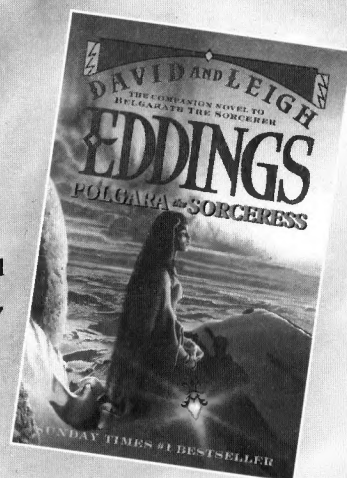


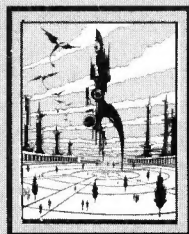
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# interZone

March 1998

129

science fiction & fantasy

## CONTENTS

### Fiction

<b>ERIC BROWN</b> <b>Vulpheous</b> <i>Illustrated by Dominic Harman</i>	<b>6</b>
<b>SARAH ASH</b> <b>Merveille</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>URI GELLER</b> <b>Newbold</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>FRANK COTTRELL BOYCE</b> <b>The Ahhhhh</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>JAYME LYNN BLASCHKE</b> <b>The Dust</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>PAUL DI FILIPPO</b> <b>Don't Let Them See You Nova</b>	<b>52</b>

### Features

<b>INTERFACE</b> <i>Editorial</i>	<b>4</b>
<b>DAVID LANGFORD</b> <b>Ansible Link</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>MOTHS IN MY MUSIC</b> <i>Sarah Ash interviewed by David Mathew</i>	<b>23</b>
<b>NICK LOWE</b> <b>Mutant Popcorn Film reviews</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>WENDY BRADLEY</b> <b>Tube Corn TV reviews</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>GARY WESTFAHL</b> <b>Greyer Lensmen or, Looking Backward in Anger</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>PAUL DI FILIPPO, CHRIS GILMORE, PETER CROWTHER,</b> <b>BRIAN STABLEFORD AND PAUL BRAZIER</b> <i>Book and media reviews</i>	<b>54</b>
<b>Cover by Dominic Harman</b>	

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# Interface

Thinking about the history of fiction magazines (as one does), I came to the realization recently that *Interzone* is probably the last English-language fiction monthly published anywhere outside the USA – in any genre. (And, if you allow a quibble, I could make the claim that the last five remaining “monthlies” in America – Asimov’s, *Analog*, *Alfred Hitchcock’s* and *Ellery Queen’s* [all from the same publisher] plus the independent *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* [now edited by Gordon Van Gelder] have all ceased to be true monthlies now that they have gone to 11 issues a year, one of those issues being a “double.”) It’s an astonishing conclusion, when one considers how very common fiction monthlies (and weeklies) used to be in the earlier part of this century.

And the history of those older fiction magazines is remarkably well buried. Everyone has heard of the American pulp magazines, which retain a kind of mythical status in the collective memory, but how many people know about the British pulps? Here are some examples. The following pulp-fiction magazines used to exist in Britain:

**The Grand Magazine** – Newnes; Feb. 1905-1939; monthly, rough-paper, all-fiction stablemate to the more up-market *Strand Magazine*; authors included Edgar Wallace, E. Phillips Oppenheim, Rafael Sabatini, Agatha Christie.

**The Novel Magazine** – Pearson; Apr. 1905-Dec. 1937; monthly, all-fiction stablemate to the more up-market *Pearson’s Magazine* and *Royal Magazine*; editors Percy Winn Everett, E. Charles Vivian (from 1918); authors included Victor Rousseau, Edgar Wallace, Agatha Christie.

**The Story-Teller** – Cassell, later Newnes; Apr. 1907-late 1930s; monthly; authors included Edgar Wallace, G. K. Chesterton, Sax Rohmer (“Fu Manchu” stories, 1912), H. Rider Haggard.

**The Red Magazine** – Amalgamated Press (Harmsworth); Jun. 1908-Sep. 1939; fortnightly; became a quality-paper digest in its later years; authors included William Hope Hodgson, Edgar Wallace.

**The New Magazine** – Cassell; Apr. 1909-Dec. 1930; partially pulp; editor Harold Winbury; authors included Jacques Futrelle, Bruce Graeme (“Blackshirt” stories, 1920s).

**The Weekly Tale-Teller** – Harry Shurey; May 1909-Apr. 1916; editor Isabel Thorne; authors included Edgar Wallace (“Sanders of the River” stories from 1909), M. P. Shiel, A. M. Burrage.

**The Premier Magazine** – Amalgamated Press; May 1914-Mar. 1931; monthly; originally a quality-paper magazine, but by the early 1920s it turned into a pulp; editor David Whitelaw; authors included Rafael Sabatini, Sax Rohmer, Max Brand, Achmed Abdullah.



Two very old British fiction magazines, *Cassell’s Magazine of Fiction*, August 1917, and *The Red Magazine*, 15th July 1927

**The Home Magazine** – Newnes; c. 1918-1931 (formerly *Woman at Home*, from 1893; retitled *The Ladies’ Home Magazine* from Oct. 1922); authors included Richmal Crompton (“William” stories from 1919).

**The Blue Magazine** – Walbrook; Jun. 1919-mid 1920s; authors included Elliott O’Donnell, Guy Dent, Ella Scrymgeour.

**Hutchinson’s Story Magazine** – Hutchinson; Jul. 1919-Apr. 1921, and Jul.-Dec. 1929; monthly; first 5 issues on pulp paper, thereafter slick paper until near the end; authors included H. Rider Haggard, H. de Vere Stacpoole, Baroness Orczy, A. E. W. Mason, Sapper; retitled *Hutchinson’s Magazine*, May 1921; reverted to

*Hutchinson’s Story Magazine*, and pulp paper, Jul. 1929.

**The Sovereign Magazine** – Hutchinson; Nov. 1919-Apr. 1927; monthly; 90 issues; authors included Achmed Abdullah, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Sax Rohmer, Rafael Sabatini, Sapper.

**Pan: The Fiction Magazine** – Odham’s Press; Jul. 1921-May 1924; monthly; began as a glossy illustrator’s magazine, 1919-1921, but became a pulp; authors included Michael Arlen, Guy Dent; merged with *20 Story Magazine*, 1924.

**The Yellow Magazine** – Amalgamated Press; Sep. 1921-Sep. 1926; fortnightly.

**The Happy Mag.** – Newnes; June 1922-May 1940; monthly; authors included Richmal Crompton (“William” stories), Edgar Wallace.

**The 20 Story Magazine** – Odham’s Press; Jul. 1922-late 1930s; monthly; authors included Edgar Wallace, Hylton Cleaver, Leo Walmsley.

**The Violet Magazine** – Amalgamated Press; Jul. 1922-Nov. 1939; monthly; romantic fiction.

**Adventure-Story Magazine** – Hutchinson; Sep. 1922-Sep. 1927; monthly; 60 issues; editors E. Charles Vivian, Oscar Cook; combined with *Mystery-Story* as *Adventure & Mystery Story Magazine*, Oct. 1927-Jun. 1929 (21 issues)

**The Detective Magazine** – Amalgamated Press; Nov. 1922-?; monthly?; authors included Edgar Wallace.

**The Green Magazine** – Amalgamated Press; Nov. 1922-Dec. 1923; fortnightly; merged with *The Yellow Magazine*, 1923.

**The Corner Magazine** – Cassell; c. 1922/3-1930s; monthly?

**Mystery-Story Magazine** – Hutchinson; Feb. 1923-Sep. 1927; monthly; 55 issues; editors E. Charles Vivian, Oscar Cook; combined with *Adventure-Story* as *Adventure & Mystery Story Magazine*, Oct. 1927-Jun. 1929 (21 issues)

**Romance** – Odham’s Press; Feb. 1923-?; monthly.

**The Regent Magazine** – World’s Work; 192?-?; monthly?; may have begun life as *Tip-Top Stories* and ended as *The Jolly Magazine*; authors included Marjorie Bowen (1924-1925).

**The Sunny Mag.** – Newnes; Jul. 1925-Apr. 1933; monthly; merged with *The Happy Mag.*, 1933.

**The Argosy** – Amalgamated Press;

Jun. 1926-Jan. 1940 (unconnected with the American magazine of the same name); monthly; mainly a reprint fiction publication, it continued as a digest-size periodical from Feb. 1940 until at least 1973.

**All-Story Magazine** – Amalgamated Press; Oct. 1926-Jan. 1928; monthly; 16 issues (unconnected with the American magazine of the same name).

**World Stories** – Atlas Publishing; 1928-mid 1930s; monthly.

**The Master Thriller series** – World's Work (subsidiary of Heinemann); Jul. 1933-Dec. 1939; approx. quarterly; consisted of one-off titles: *Tales of the Foreign Legion* (5 issues), *Tales of the North-West Mounties*, *Tales of the Seven Seas*, *Tales of Mystery and Detection*, *Tales of the Uncanny* (3 issues), *Tales of African Adventure*, *Tales of the Orient*, *Tales of the Jungle*.

**Air Stories, War Stories and Western Adventures** – Newnes; all 1935-c. 1940; frequencies unknown; editor T. Stanhope Sprigg.

**Tales of Wonder** – World's Work; Summer 1937-Spring 1942; quarterly (16 issues published); editor Walter Gillings; Britain's first science-fiction magazine; authors included John Beynon, John Russell Fearn, Festus Pragnell, Eric Frank Russell.

**Fantasy** – Newnes; Jun. 1938-Jun. 1939 (only 3 issues published); irregular; editor T. Stanhope Sprigg.

There were many others, including *Cassell's Magazine* (which began life as a High Victorian periodical in 1867, but turned into a pulp, renamed *Cassell's Magazine of Fiction*, by the time of World War I) and a number of western magazines which seem to have endured into the 1950s. But most British pulps ceased publication around 1940, at the outbreak of World War II, hit by paper shortages, although some were replaced, during and after the war, by approximately "digest"-sized periodicals. Alas, there were no great UK pulps (in the sense that a number of American pulps, from *The Blue Book* and *Adventure* to *Black Mask* and *Weird Tales*, were great): all are now more-or-less forgotten, except by a few specialist collectors. The much smaller-format digests, which took up the slack after the war, included:

**The London Mystery Magazine** – Jun. 1949-May 1952, Jun. 1953-Mar. 1982; bimonthly, then quarterly.

**New Worlds** – Nova Publications, then Compact Books; Autumn 1949-Mar. 1967; quarterly, then bimonthly, then monthly; initially published

three issues in pulp format, 1946-1947; digest 1949-1964, then a pocket-sized magazine until Mar. 1967; thereafter a quarto, then an A4 bedsheet-sized magazine until Apr. 1970; total of 200 issues; editors John Carnell, Michael Moorcock.

**Science Fantasy** – Nova Publications, then Compact Books; Summer 1950-Feb. 1967; quarterly, then bimonthly; became a monthly retitled *SF Impulse* in its last year; total of 93 issues; editors John Carnell, Kyril Bonfiglioli.

**John Creasey Mystery Magazine** – c. 1956-1965; monthly.

**Suspense** – Amalgamated Press; c. 1958-1961; monthly.

**Edgar Wallace Mystery Magazine** – Aug. 1964-Jun. 1967 (35 issues); monthly.



.... and two very recent British fiction magazines, *The Edge* and *The Third Alternative* (both from the latter part of 1997)

There were others, including the sf magazines *Authentic* (1951-1957), *Nebula* (1952-1959) and *Science-Fiction Adventures* (1958-1963), plus western magazines galore. And – pulps and digests aside – the above listings take no account of all the standard general magazines and "slicks" which also published copious fiction, beginning (let's say) with *The Strand Magazine* in 1891, and running through such interwar big slicks as *Nash's Pall Mall Magazine* in the 1920s and 1930s, to the postwar women's glossies. (Then there were the story papers, *The Union Jack*, *The Magnet*, *The Gem*, *The Thriller* and *Peg's Paper* being perhaps the best-remembered titles – but let's not get into those; see George Orwell's famous essay "Boys' Weeklies" [1940] or E. S. Turner's excellent book *Boys Will Be Boys* [1948; revised 1957, 1975].)

Radio and television are the prime culprits in the killing-off of all these magazines. And let's not forget that radio and TV borrowed a number of

their fictional formats (and characters) from the magazines. The concept of the short-segment recurring-character "series," for example, so essential to 20th-century broadcasting, was invented by Conan Doyle for his first Sherlock Holmes short-story series in *The Strand Magazine* in 1891. (Perhaps co-credit should be given to editor Herbert Greenhough Smith and illustrator Sidney Paget – *The Strand*, with all its imitators, really was the nearest thing to TV in its day; and right up to the present the BBC still seems to commission its series in blocks of six or twelve, just as Greenhough Smith commissioned Doyle.) At a push, one could make similar claims for soap and sitcom and serial...

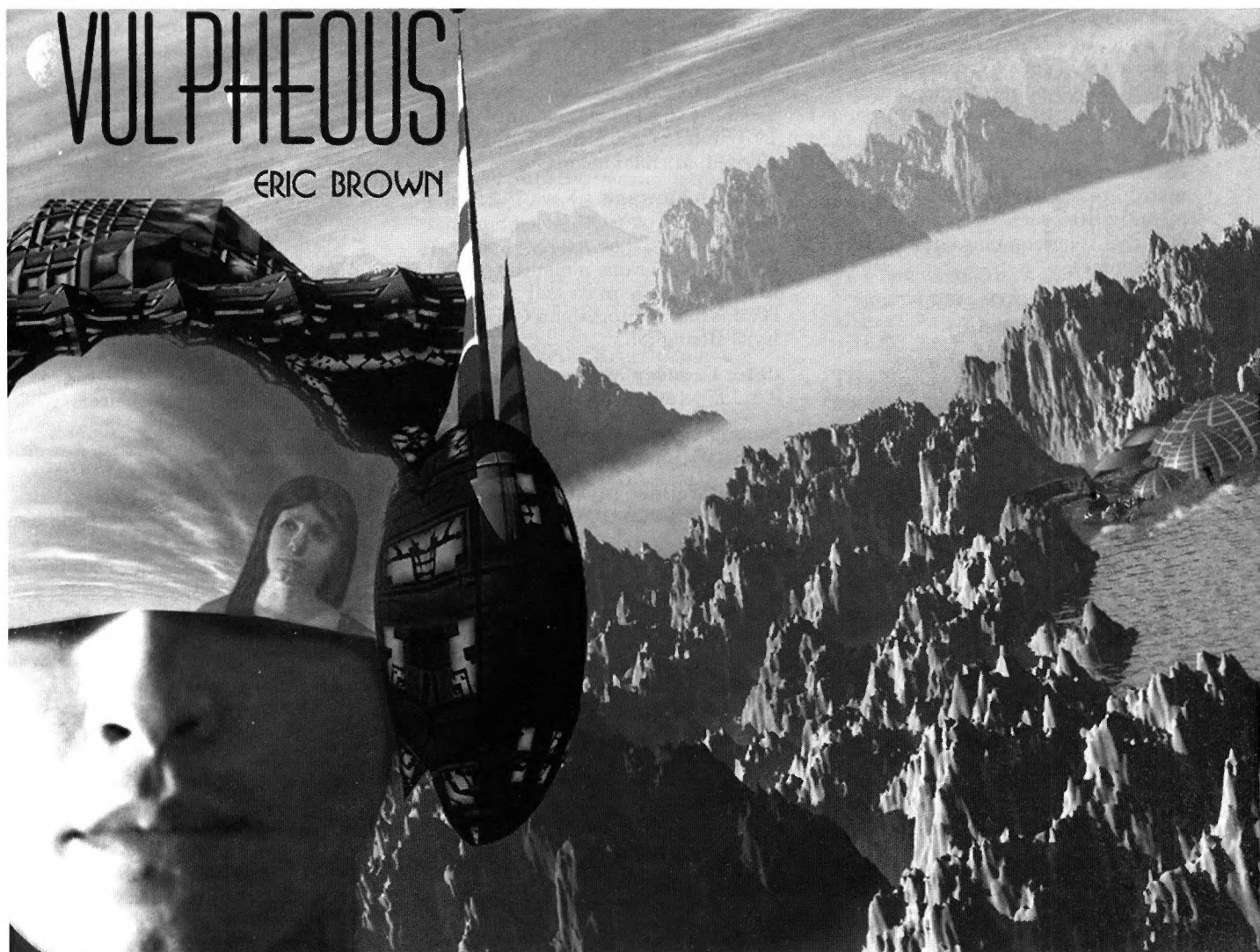
Of course, the death of the digests was not quite the end of the story as far as British fiction magazines are concerned. To come back to the present day, and to narrow the focus to our preferred genres, we ran a list in *IZ* 100 of all the attempts at British sf, fantasy and horror magazines which have come and gone since 1970 – "the rivals of *Interzone*," if you like – from *Vision of Tomorrow* (1969-1970) and *Science Fiction Monthly* (1974-1976) to *Far Point* (1991-1992) and *Beyond* (1995-?). These were not pulps or digests but took the preferred contemporary shape of large-format (more or less "slick") magazines, like *Interzone*. None lasted long. But now a new rival has come on the scene, *Odyssey*, edited by Liz Holliday, of which, I believe, three issues have

appeared so far (numbers 0, 1 and 2). It's a glossy bimonthly, publishing many of the same authors that *Interzone* publishes, though with perhaps more of a fantasy bias than *IZ* has, and we wish it the best of luck. Meanwhile a number of small-press, semi-professional magazines continue to flourish, of which perhaps the best current examples in Britain are Andy Cox's *The Third Alternative* (quarterly since 1994), Graham Evans's *The Edge* (irregular since the early 1990s, though recently claiming bimonthly) and Liz and Deirdre Counihan's *Scheherazade* (small-format, approximately quarterly since the early 1990s).

None of the magazines just mentioned is published monthly, which brings me back to my opening claim, or question. Is *Interzone* the last English-language fiction monthly left anywhere, in any genre?

David Pringle

(Thanks to Jack Adrian and Mike Ashley for some of the above information – though they are not responsible for any errors. Further relevant information will be welcomed from readers.)



**T**he landscape that enclosed Connery and his campsite was stark and inhospitable – the crater of a long-extinct volcano a kilometre wide, its inner walls encircling a perfect disc of still, green water. A fitting venue, Connery thought, for the final act of a drama that had lasted five years. For that long he had tracked the last existing Vulpheous on Tartarus, at first following no more than folk-tales and rumours, later picking up the trail of the creature sighted by mariners and islanders across the southern sea from the continent of Iriarte to the archipelago of Demargé. Now he had traced it to its lair, its final resting place before the sun went nova.

Three days ago he had pitched his dome and set up his equipment, and it was while he was working in the intense heat of the early morning that his hopes were confirmed. According to the fisher-folk now evacuated from the islands of the chain, the last remaining Vulpheous on the planet had emerged from the sea a year ago, scaled the incline of the volcano, and disappeared over the side in search of its aeons-old spawning lake. Connery had taken their stories lightly – he'd been disappointed too many times in the past – but, while installing his monitors beside the water, he was alerted by a bubbling disturbance on the surface of the lake. He turned in time to see the grey bulk of the creature's huge head break the surface, water cascading from its hide in scintillating cataracts. He stared in awe and exquisite relief for a minute while the Vulpheous took

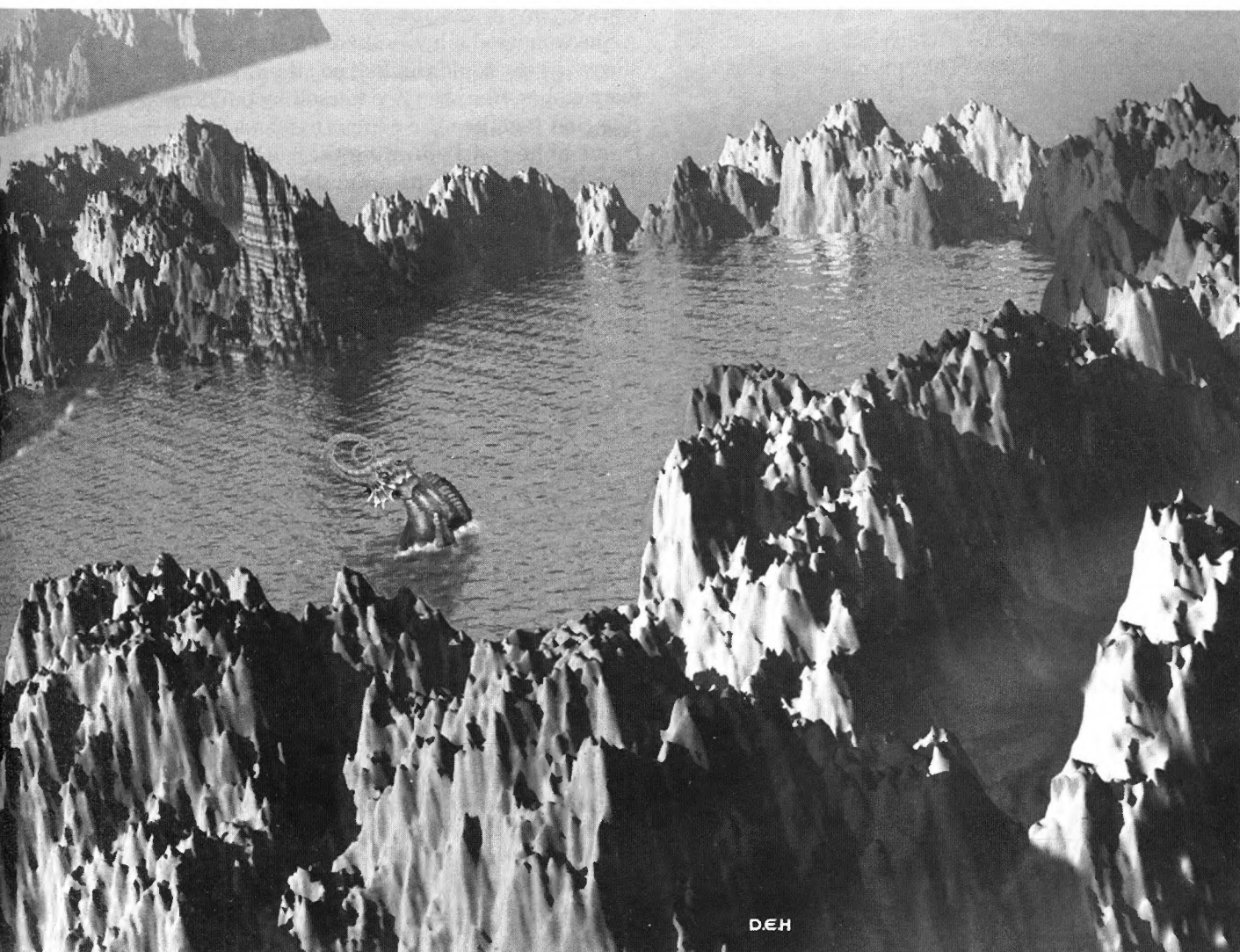
in air to sustain it in its submarine lair for four to five days. Then the creature ejected a spume of water like a cockade from its cranial blow-hole, and submerged, leaving the lake serene and undisturbed. For the next three nights Connery worked hard erecting his equipment in preparation for the creature's next appearance.

Now he stepped from the air-conditioned coolness of his dome and was enveloped by the cloying evening heat. He wore only shorts and boots, and within seconds his exposed skin was covered with an irritating film of sweat. He walked down the incline, through a rattling scree of pumice, towards the water's edge.

These days the sun was so huge and emitted so much light that it was no longer discernible as a sphere: it filled the sky during the day with a pure white glow, blinding to look upon. During the pulsing hours of night, the heavens were a gaudy, beribboned display of magenta and tangerine strata, and this was when Connery preferred to work. It was hot, even then, but not as hot as the flesh-burning, furnace heat of day.

He stepped beneath the sun-reflective canopy where he stored his equipment, found his air-tanks and strapped them to his back. He exchanged his boots for flippers and picked up the underwater flashlight. He located his mask and stepped from the canopy into the water.

It was a thick, warm soup that offered no relief from the twilight humidity. As he waded further into the lake, the gradient of the slope quickly taking the water level past his knees and groin, the algae seemed to suck at



D&H

Illustrations by Dominic Harman

his flesh. Suppressing a shiver of disgust, he switched on the flashlight and kicked out from the shore. Within seconds he had penetrated the mat of algae and was swimming through an aqueous, jade green realm, the water becoming cooler as he descended,

For ten years after Madelaine's death he had lived alone, the first five spent exploring many of the Thousand Worlds – less, he realized later, through a genuine curiosity than a desire to fill his time and thoughts with anything other than his grief. Then, after something told to him by a physician on Solomon's Reach, he had come to Tartarus in search of the Vulpheous. Once more his life had a reason, a goal.

When he reached the area where he judged the creature had risen three days ago, he turned his flashlight into the depths and swam after its widening beam. It had occurred to him that the Vulpheous might not surface for a second time in exactly the same position. If it re-emerged at another part of the lake, then all his preparations would be in vain. It would be a tragedy if he wasted valuable time chasing the creature around the lake after assuming it to be so captive a target. The last TWC evacuation ship left Tartarus in three months, and Connery planned to be on it.

In the illumination of his flashlight, tiny silver fish turned as one like a million scintillating components of some larger, gestalt creature. The Vulpheous was not occupying the lake bed directly beneath the place where it had surfaced.

Connery manoeuvred himself into a standing position, moved his right flipper and turned the flashlight in a great probing circle. He was almost back where he'd started when the cone of light picked out what appeared to be a colossal boulder. He started, shocked, despite himself. He'd seen pix of the creature, even seen its great head in the flesh the other day, but nothing had prepared him for the fact of its size. Physically it resembled a sea elephant, though Connery estimated the Vulpheous to be fully 20 times bigger. It reposed on the lake bed in dolorous obesity, something tragic in its isolation. According to the islanders it was a female which, unable to be impregnated, had returned anyway to the place of its birth, not to spawn young but to die in the imminent nova. Amid the piled flesh that was the creature's head, Connery could see two tiny, bright yellow eyes, staring out at him. He felt a great sadness then, almost a regret at what he was doing.

He switched off his flashlight and rose quickly to the surface of the lake. The water warmed as he swam, and when he broke through the raft of algae he felt the heat of the night on his skin. From the pouch in his shorts he pulled an inflatable buoy, activated it and left the bulbous red and yellow marker on the algae above the creature's position. When he returned to camp, he would recalibrate his equipment to the position of the buoy.

As he swam towards the shore and his camp, he thought of Madelaine. Upon his arrival on Tartarus, he had made a promise to her memory – a ridiculous and

romantic thing to do, which his younger self would never have understood, but which somehow seemed right in the circumstances. That promise was close to being fulfilled.

He was wading from the lake, his limbs suddenly heavy, when he caught a glimpse of movement perhaps half a kilometre away to his right. At the narrow defile in the encircling crater, though which he himself had entered, he made out a small, human figure. It was moving slowly down the incline towards the lake. After assuming he was the only person on the island – perhaps even on the entire archipelago – it came as a shock to find that his triumphal arena had been invaded.

He shrugged off his air-tank and set to work on the equipment beneath the canopy.

After her arduous, zigzag climb up the side of the volcano, Leona arrived exhausted at the gap in the rock overlooking the lake. She sat and stared down at the perfect circle, sudden tears blurring her vision. She wiped them away with the back of her hand, telling herself that she was no longer a child: she was a woman, now, and women didn't cry, not even after spending three days canoeing from her island and climbing the volcano to the lake considered holy by her people.

She could have rested for longer, but decided to press on. Once she had pitched her tent beside the lake, and said her prayers to the healer, then she could rest for as long as she liked. It would be a reward for the hardship of getting this far. She had never really believed that she would succeed in crossing the straits, still less be able to scale the volcano. She had expected her boat to sink, or that she would collapse exhausted halfway up the mountainside. That she had made it this far was an omen: her pilgrimage would be a success.

She climbed to her feet and adjusted her pack, its leather thongs biting painfully into her shoulders. The ground on this inner rim of the crater had absorbed the heat of the setting sun, and the rock was griddle-hot beneath her bare feet. She picked her way carefully down the incline, trying to step in the shadows cast by the rocks that littered the slope. She wondered if her tribe would be thinking of her now, if her mother was wondering whether she had reached the holy lake. She glanced into the sky, at the colourful display that reminded her of the feathers of a belcher-bird, and tried to imagine the stars her mother had told her were once visible at night. It was hard to believe that her people were being carried to a new star aboard the great TWC ship – even though three weeks ago she had concealed herself behind a bush on her island and watched fearfully as it ate up her tribe and left Tartarus for ever.

Now she was here, and perhaps if all went well she would one day be joining her people in their new home among the stars.

She was standing at the water's edge, on a flat shelf of rock she thought would be a good place to erect her tent, when she saw that she was not alone. Three stone throws around the lake was a man. More than just his impressive height told her that he must be an off-worlder. There was a lot of machinery beneath a silver canopy, strange devices that Leona had never seen before, and farther up the slope was a silver living dome. The man was crouching beneath the canopy,

working on his machinery.

She wondered if he was here for the same reason that she was – she could think of no other – and the thought worried her. She occupied herself by building her tent. She tied together the canes that had doubled as the frame of her pack, forming the outline of a pyramid. Then she unfolded the animal-skin cover of the pack and draped it over the pyramid. She ducked inside, unrolled her sleeping blanket across the rock, and set out her scant possessions beside it: her comb, her eating bowl and cup, and her five important powders. It was dark inside the tent; she hoped that it would be as dark when the sun came up in the morning, affording her cool shade.

She left the tent and walked to the water's edge. She sat cross-legged and said a prayer, paying her respects to the healer, telling it that at last she had arrived. Later, she would chant the mantra that her people's holy-man had taught her, the ritual of the Summoning.

After prayers, she stripped off her dress and washed it in the lake, having to wade in to her neck to get past the plant-life. The water was like a balm on her hot and tired skin. She felt soothed by its warm envelopment, and at the same time blessed that she was sharing the lake with *ultarrak*. She fetched her cup from the tent and strained a quantity of water through the material of her dress. This she drank, slaking her thirst. She strained another cupful and carried it carefully to the tent for later. She laid her dress out on the hot rock, and then scraped the water droplets from her body. Within minutes she was dry, and not long after that so was her dress. She stepped into the garment, tied the laces up the front, and then stared along the shore of the lake to where the off-worlder was still busy beneath the canopy.

What was he doing? Why would a man from the stars camp beside the lake and set up his complicated machinery?

Once, when she was a girl, a small tribe of off-worlders wearing blue uniforms had come to her island in flying machines. The elders greeted them, and shared food and drink with the strange men and women, and then told the rest of the tribe that the off-worlders were people of honour and could be trusted. For days Leona had watched the strangers move around the island – counting people for the eventual evacuation, according to the elders. She had come to trust the tall men and women of the TWC, had even accepted fruit from a woman with hair the colour of blood-grass. Now she felt no fear of the off-worlder who had arrived at the lake before her, just a slight apprehension as to what he was doing here.

Refreshed after her ablutions, and comfortable in her clean dress, she walked along the shore towards the off-worlder's camp.

He was still busy working with the machinery, his back to Leona, when she arrived at the canopy. She hitched up her dress around her knees, squatted, and hugged her shins. In silence she watched as he worked. He was doing something to two long, pointed mechanisms that were directed at the centre of the lake. As he worked, he talked to himself in a language unfamiliar to Leona.

He was even bigger than she had originally thought.

His skin was a lighter shade of brown than hers, a copper tone that glistened with sweat. She watched his muscles as they slipped and tightened beneath his skin. She recalled Yarta, a boy who had gone with the rest of them into the TWC ship, and how she had felt for him in those hopeless days before the evacuation.

She blushed when she realized that the man was watching her. She felt embarrassed, as if he had been able to read the run of her thoughts.

In her own language, more to divert his attention from her blushes than to elicit any reply, she asked him what he was doing here.

The man smiled gently, and shrugged his shoulders. He said something in his strange, soft language, and then returned to his machinery. From time to time he glanced from his work, his eyes lingering on her in a way Leona found at first invasive and then complimentary. She knew she was blushing again, in confusion: she had never before had the attentions of a man, and she was unsure how to respond.

She decided that his presence beside the lake had nothing to do with the healer. Off-worlders were ignorant of important things of the spirit – her people had laughed when the TWC off-worlders claimed they knew nothing of the sun god whose anger was causing the sun to explode – and clearly this man was more bothered about his machinery than *ultarrak*.

She stood quickly and retraced her steps around the lake, increasing her pace when he called something after her. When she looked over her shoulder, he was standing beneath the canopy, wiping his hands on a rag and watching her.

Back at her tent, she mixed her powders in the bowl of water. She was careful with the white powder, the *fehna* – the right amount would bring relief, but too much could kill her. When the mixture had turned the water blood-red, she raised the bowl to her lips and drank the concoction in one long draft. She felt its heat coursing through her, and told herself that she could feel its restorative powers working already.

Later, when she felt the time was right, she left her tent. Her stomach fluttered with apprehension, she sat cross-legged before the lake, bowed her head and began the mantra of the Summoning.

Connery saw the girl as she approached hesitantly around the curve of the lake. He watched her covertly until she was within a few metres of the canopy, then bent to his work. So as not to scare her off, he would let her initiate conversation. He'd had contact with the tribal people of the southern seas: they were an insular, shy people who were easily frightened by the brusque and confident ways of outsiders.

After perhaps an hour of silence, he glanced across at the girl. She was squatting on her heels, her brown arms hugging her shins. She seemed miles away, lost in her own thoughts. When she noticed him looking at her, she blushed and spoke so hurriedly that he was unable to catch the meaning of her corrupted French dialect.

He smiled and shrugged and returned to his work. From time to time he stole glances at her. She was tiny and dark-skinned, with long black hair and a thin, high-cheekboned face.

She wore a short dress made from animal skins,



sleeveless and laced up the front. He guessed her to be on the cusp of womanhood, perhaps 16 or 17 Earth years old.

He wondered what she was doing here, why she had not left the planet with the rest of her people. He wanted to ask her, but she seemed as shy as a bird – as if any sudden word or movement from him might frighten her away.

When she did finally leave, jumping up quickly and hurrying around the shore, he called to her to come back soon, then stood and watched her go. Something turned in his stomach, not a physical pang at the sight of her slim back and quick brown legs, but a more fundamental sense of longing and loss represented by her hurried retreat.

He did another hour's work on the machinery, then retired to his dome. He showered in the recycled lake water, then sat in the air-conditioned luxury of the dome's main section. He heated one of the pre-packed trays he'd bought from the TWC surplus stores at Baudelaire, and slowly ate the tasteless meal.

Beyond the transparent wall of the dome, he could see the sky losing its colour as the merciless sun rose on another day. In an hour or two the temperature would increase by 40 degrees, by which time he would be asleep and oblivious to the hellish conditions outside. And when he woke, in approximately ten hours, he would be ready for when the Vulpheous next chose to surface.

He darkened the wall of his dome to shut out the heat and light of the day, then stepped outside and peered along the shore to the small, triangular irregularity of the girl's tent. Already the heat was sapping, and the sun had not yet fully risen. He returned inside, filled a container with two litres of cool, sparkling water, picked up a food tray and left the dome.

The girl sat by the water's edge, her back straight, her head bowed. As he walked along the shore, she uncrossed her legs, stood and ducked into her tent. He wondered how she hoped to exist here with no source of renewable foodstuffs and only the brackish water of the lake to drink.

He knelt outside the tent. "Hello," he called.

Almost immediately she drew aside a flap and peered out, her expression neutral. She ducked from the tent and sat cross-legged before him. He matched her posture, then held out the food and water.

She looked at him, her face radiant. She spoke in her sing-song French patois. "For me?"

"For you," he replied.

She stared at him. She spoke quickly, and though he caught only every other word, he was able to make out what might have been: "You can speak my language?"

"A little – if you speak very slowly. Do you understand?"

She nodded, her eyes on the tray of food and container of water.

"I thought you might like these. A present. Do you have food of your own?"

Her eyes were big and brown, the whites very white. They widened as she said, "None, only water."

He tried not to smile. "Then how do you hope to survive?"

She stared at him, her head on one side. Finally she shrugged, then cast her eyes down to where her fingers worried the imperfect hem of her animal-skin dress.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

She did not look up. "I am here to pay respects," she whispered. "With luck, I will be helped by *ultarrak*"

Connery did not know the word. He shook his head. "There are no more people here, just you and me."

She shrugged again, either unwilling or unable to enlighten him.

"How did you get here?" he asked. "From which island do you come?"

At this, she was more willing to speak. "By canoe," she said, glancing up at him, then shyly back down again at her fingers. "Three days from Sauv  ."

He had seen the island on his map, part of a small archipelago that ran parallel with the main Demarg   chain.

"But what of your people?"

"My people have left for the stars in great ships."

Connery shook his head, feeling a sudden stab of pity for the girl.

"Why were you left behind? Why didn't you go with them?"

She shook her head in a show of frustration. "No... I could not go with them. I had to come to the holy lake. Later, I will join my people."

"Later? How much later? How long will you stay here?"

She had plucked the hem of her dress to a frayed tassel. "Perhaps a year, maybe more. It is not up to me."

"A year?" he echoed. "A year without food?"

She looked up at him, her wide eyes critical of his ignorance. "I do not need food!" she said.

"But in a year... Don't you realize that in a year the sun might have blown?"

"A year, or two," she corrected him. "Who knows?"

A silence came between them as the heat of dawn increased. He could not keep his eyes from the swelling of her small breasts he glimpsed through the zigzag lacing of her dress.

At last the girl asked in a small voice, "Why are you here? What are your devices?" She pointed towards the canopy.

Connery thought about his reply. If she considered the lake holy, would she consider what he was doing a desecration?

"I am a scientist," he said at last. "I am studying the lake."

She nodded, glanced from him to the burning sky. She touched the food tray and container. "Thank you," she whispered, and made to move to her tent.

He reached out a hand, forestalling her. "I'm Connery," he said. "And you are?"

"Leona," she said, and unsure how to respond to his gesture, touched the tips of his fingers with hers. He took her hand, and she stared at him in surprise.

"I... There is plenty of spare room in my dome," he said. "And food. You can't live in that thing – you wouldn't last a day. Please, you can join me if you wish."

Her watchful expression gave no indication that she had understood him. She pulled her fingers free of his and crawled into the tent, taking the food and water with her.

Connery made his way back to his dome, took another shower and lay on his bunk. He could not banish the thought of Leona from his mind. He considered the heat, unbearable even at this early hour. How

might she exist with nothing but the flimsy skin tent to shade her as the day progressed?

Leona sat cross-legged, clutching the cool container of water. Already the heat inside the tent was unbearable – a dank humidity that made a full breath impossible. Still, this was preferable to the direct light of the sun, which would have burned her skin in minutes.

She closed her eyes and considered the events of the past few hours. Her summons had failed to attract *ultarrak*. She had said the mantra just as the holy-man had told her, and emptied her mind of everything but her principal wish – but nothing had happened.

And then the off-worlder had arrived, bearing gifts.

She had assumed the correct posture to accept the gifts, and looked into his eyes only occasionally, as custom dictated in these matters. He should have said straight away, if he wanted her, that she was welcome to share his dwelling, but instead he had asked many questions, and only later asked her to join him in her dome. Well, perhaps customs were different on his home world.

One hour passed, then two, and the temperature and humidity inside the tent rose steadily. The sun was so bright that its invading light pierced the threadbare patches of her tent and smote her with a heat like burning coals. She took a long drink of cold water from Connery's container, but seconds later she was thirsty again.

When she judged that a suitable duration had elapsed, she slipped from the tent and dismantled it, transforming it quickly back into a pack. She stowed away her cup and bowl, and made sure her six leather pouches of powders were secure. By the time she was ready, the sunlight was burning her skin, the heat searing her throat. Then, her heart beating wildly in her chest, she walked around the lake towards Connery's dome.

Before she reached the off-worlder's dwelling, she knelt and cast about for a sharp sliver of pumice. She found a suitable length, tested its point for sharpness, and slipped it into her belt.

She passed into the dome through two doors which opened like the petals of a flower, first the outer door and then the inner. It was cold inside, and Leona wondered how this was achieved. It was as if the inside of the dome was another world entirely.

Connery was not in the main chamber, but an opening gave access to a second, smaller room. Leona stepped silently across the threshold. The off-worlder lay on his bunk, staring at her.

At the sight of his gaze, Leona almost stopped dead in her tracks. A part of her wanted to turn and flee. Another part, which knew that this was what should happen, made her continue towards the bed.

She perched herself on the side of his bunk, very aware of his bulk beside her, though her eyes were star-

ing at the floor. From her belt she pulled her pumice dagger, and reached out for his bare chest. Only then could she bring herself to look into his eyes. He was staring at her with a startled, shocked expression, his head raised from the bed. She smiled to indicate that she would be gentle. She held the point of the dagger above his sternum. He moved his hand, as if to stop her, but did not. Perhaps this was another of her people's customs that differed slightly on the off-worlder's home planet.

She lowered the dagger until its point touched the tanned flesh of his chest. Then she applied pressure. He let out a breath. A droplet of blood welled. She drew the dagger lightly down his torso, from sternum to abdomen, alternately scoring a bloody line and a thin white scratch across his skin. He gripped the side of the bunk, breathing hard, staring at her.

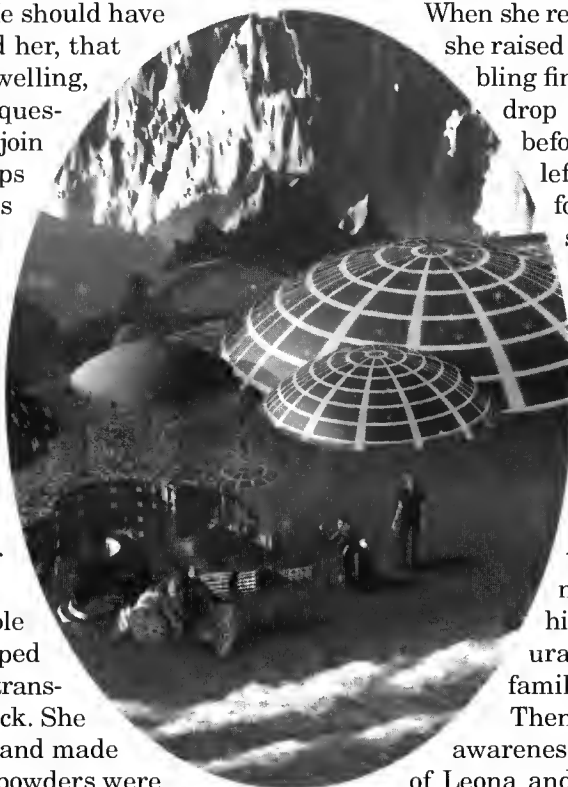
When she reached the muscles of his stomach, she raised the dagger and stood. With trembling fingers she unlaced her dress, let it drop and stepped from it. She stood before him naked, but his eyes never left her face. She raised the dagger for a second time, pressed it to the skin between her breasts, and winced as she dug the point home and scored it down her body. Then she threw aside the dagger and joined Connery, wound to wound, on the bed.

For a few seconds as he came awake, Connery felt the weight of the girl in his arms and his thoughts were filled with the notion of Madelaine. He convinced himself that he could smell the natural scent of her small body, hear the familiar sound of her breathing.

Then he regained his senses and his awareness was flooded with the memories of Leona and her strange courtship rite. An immediate, stabbing sense of regret was soon sluiced away by the memory of what had passed between them. It was more than five years since he had last made love to a woman, during which time he told himself that he missed neither the intimacy or the affection: the truth was that he had missed both, but as the years passed by he found it ever more difficult to initiate a relationship. Whether this inability was caused by the fear of losing a loved one for a second time, or the thought that he was being unfaithful to the memory of Madelaine, he did not know.

He carefully disengaged himself from her limbs and left her sleeping on the bunk. He dressed quickly, hardly taking his eyes from the girl. She rolled onto her back, into the space he had vacated, and twitched slightly in her sleep.

He was about to leave the dome to check his equipment before the surfacing of the Vulpheous when Leona spasmed, her whole body convulsing for an instant as if electrocuted. This brought her awake; she sat up, shivering and staring across at him. Her mouth moved, but no words came. She lay back, staring up at the apex of the dome and crying. She was hugging her shoulders and



pulling her knees up to her chest, as if in an effort to warm herself. Connery rushed across to her, tried to hold her. She pushed his arms away, pointed across the chamber to her pack on the floor. "In there" she gasped. "Powder."

He almost tore the pack apart in a bid to get at its contents. He pulled out half a dozen pouches heavy with crystallized substances and stared across at Leona.

"Water!" she cried.

He fetched a water container and a cup. "Now what? For chrissake what do I do?"

"A little... a little of each powder in the cup."

His fingers huge and useless, he pulled the drawstring on the first pouch and nipped out an amount of yellow powder. He held it up to Leona, who nodded, watching him with eyes wide in desperation as he transferred the powder to the cup. He did the same with the second and third pouch, but when he came to the fourth, Leona screamed aloud. "No! Less... That much can kill!"

He dropped a few grains into the cup, then continued with the two remaining powders. He stirred the concoction with a finger, surprised to see it turn blood-red and viscous, then carried it over to the girl. He put an arm around her shoulders and lifted the cup to her lips. Steadying it with both hands, she drank the fluid in grateful gulps. She seemed immediately to relax. He lay her back on the bunk, stroking a sweat-soaked strand of hair from her forehead.

"What is it?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "Nothing... I will be fine." She smiled at him, a dreamy half-smile, as her eyes closed in sleep.

He remained with her for a while, watching her even breathing and working to calm himself. Through the wall of the dome he could see the fiery night sky slowly replacing the magnesium glare of daytime, the streaked scarlets and tangerines gaining in strength. He stroked Leona's hair one last time and left the dome, the heat and humidity breaking over him in an almost palpable wave.

There was something unnatural about the scene as he stood beneath the canopy and stared out across the lake, the green circle of water beneath the two-tone sky suggesting the garish nightmare of a crazed Expressionist. Connery had never felt at home on Tartarus, among its many strange peoples and even stranger places. He would breathe easier when finally he took his leave of the dying planet. His yacht was anchored in a sheltered cove on the other side of the island, and sailing time to Baudelaire was a matter of three or four weeks. He thought of Leona, the fact that she had told him she would remain here "to pay her respects," as she had said, for a year or more...

He checked and rechecked the settings and calibrations of his equipment. All was as it should be. The lasers, grapples and hawsers were primed to activate when he keyed in the single command on the terminal beside him. All that remained was for the Vulpheous to show itself.

He heard the outer door of the dome open and watched Leona pick her way across to him. She was shy in the aftermath of their lovemaking, her eyes downcast. They sat on the shore of the lake and Connery put an arm around her shoulders.

At last he asked, "Do you have to stay here for a year? Couldn't you leave in a few days?"

Her shoulders moved in a shrug beneath his forearm. "I must... at least a year. I wish I could leave soon, but that is impossible."

"Why, Leona? What are you doing here?"

She shook her head, as if she found it impossible to explain. She glanced at him, and he saw tears in her eyes. "And you?" she asked. "When do you leave?"

He hesitated. Soon, in a year or so, the sun would blow. He would be long gone by then. The gift he would give to the Thousand Worlds could not be jeopardized by needless delay.

"I don't know," he said. "I was thinking of leaving soon."

She glanced at him, then past him at his arrayed machinery. "Your work will be finished then?"

He nodded. "With luck, yes, it will."

She looked from his equipment and out across the lake, then returned her gaze to him. "What are they for, Connery?"

He sighed. He had prevaricated earlier when she had asked him the same question. Now he felt compelled to tell her what he was doing, to try to explain himself.

"A great creature lives out there in the lake," he told her. "The Vulpheous. For five years I've tracked it across the southern seas. It's the last of its kind and it has returned here to die." He shrugged. "Soon, when it surfaces, I will kill it humanely and drag its carcass to the shore —"

He stopped when he felt her stiffen beneath his arm. She pulled away and stared at him. "Kill it? You want to kill it?"

"Leona, I know it seems barbaric—"

He stopped. At that second, a slow series of air-bubbles broke the surface of the lake.

Connery slipped into the seat behind the laser cannon, sighting down the 'scope at the ripples radiating from close to the marker buoy. Now that the time had come, the culminating event of five years' hard work, his awareness of the world was reduced to the surfacing creature, the laser and himself. He stared down the 'scope, the blood pounding in his temples, and cried out as the domed head of the Vulpheous butted ponderously through the mat of algae, emerging with the slow grace of all colossal creatures. Connery reached out to the terminal keyboard.

He heard a scream, and saw a flash of movement from the corner of his eye. Leona dived at the laser cannon as his finger struck the command key. The piercing blue needle shot high and wide of its target as the cannon toppled with the girl clinging to its barrel. Timed to activate seconds after the laser, the harpoon and grapples exploded out from beneath the canopy, missing Leona by centimetres. Connery watched as the harpoon struck the water before the Vulpheous. Then the hawser sprang into programmed action, hauling in the grapples empty but for gouts of algae and weed.

The Vulpheous, either alarmed by the unaccustomed activity or sated with air, began its leisurely descent. The bulk of its body disappeared slowly, followed by its ugly, domed head. Its tiny yellow eyes seemed to bore across the lake at Connery, at once mocking and accusing.

Leona scrambled from the tangle of machinery, righted herself and ran up the slope. She disappeared

behind the dome and seconds later Connery heard her muffled sobs.

He picked up the laser, checking it for damage, and did the same with the hawser and grapples. He recalibrated the weapon and recovery equipment, the weight of aborted expectation settling over him like a depression. He told himself that nothing was lost, that he would try again when the Vulpheous next emerged, and this time succeed.

He spent an hour needlessly going over the programme, waiting until Leona's sobs abated. When there was silence he left the canopy and walked around the dome. He found her seated on a low boulder, her face lowered to her palms. She looked up as his step scattered pumice, wincing as if she thought he might strike her.

He sat down on the rock next to the girl and was silent for long minutes. At last he reached out and gripped the back of her neck, her skin hot to his touch. He pulled her towards him so that her head pressed against his chest.

In a whisper, he asked, "Is the Vulpheous special to your people?"

She drew a breath, hiccupped on a last sob, nodded. "We call it *ultarrak*," she murmured. "It is as you say – *special*."

Connery nodded, silently massaging her neck. "I want to tell you something," he said, almost in a whisper. "I don't know if you'll understand, but I'll tell you anyway."

He was silent for a while, marshalling his thoughts, going over the events of the past and sorting them into some kind of consecutive order.

"Twelve years ago my wife was told that she was suffering from an illness known as Hartmann's disease. It was very rare and very deadly. Only a hundred or so cases had been diagnosed since records were kept on all the planets of the Thousand Worlds, and most of the sufferers had succumbed to the disease. It was a viral infection that invaded the lymphatic system, causing paralysis and death within six months. My wife's specialist held out no hope. I took her home and hired a nurse to help me look after her. I resigned from my job as a physicist with the TWC and spent all my time investigating the disease. The last ten victims, spread far and wide across the Worlds, had all died within the allotted six months, but I discovered that two sufferers had survived. However, these people had lived 50 years ago – their medical records were scant and both men were no longer alive. You can't imagine, though, how the knowledge that Hartmann's could be beaten filled me with a hope that in retrospect seemed futile, but at the time kept me alive... I spent a fortune travelling around the Worlds, interviewing people, talking to doctors and scientists, quacks and charlatans... I got nowhere. Back on Earth, my wife was slowly deteriorating. I reached the point where I recognized that I had to give up, return to Madelaine and nurse her through her last months."

He paused, suddenly pitched into the present with the tribal girl in the crater of an extinct volcano, on a dying world a long, long way from Earth. Leona was silent but for an occasional sniff, her cheek against his chest.

"After her death I left Earth and the memories and travelled to some of the Thousand Worlds I'd never seen

before..."

He was running away, and he knew it, but it seemed the right thing to do at the time. He could not face Earth and the painful associations it provoked, and he told himself that a few years away from the place would work wonders. In time, when the thought of Madelaine's passing no longer tore at his insides, he would return.

He was in a bar in an exotic port city on a world called Solomon's Reach when he fell into conversation with a fellow drunk who introduced himself and added that he was a doctor of medicine. Connery was inebriated and maudlin and it was perhaps natural that the topic of conversation should turn to his late wife and the disease that had taken her life. The information that Madelaine had succumbed to Hartmann's had an odd effect on the doctor. He hiccupped and straightened on his bar-stool, with that comical attempt at sobriety that sometimes affects those drunks who wish to make a point.

The doctor told Connery that he had heard of Hartmann's disease. Not only that, but had actually studied the virus at medical school, paying particular attention to the case histories of the two victims who had survived the disease.

"They were saved by... by some substance derived from the liver of a beast that lived on the world of Tartarus, a backwoods planet along the arm."

Connery could never recall his precise reaction to this news, but he suspected that it might have been lachrymose.

"But... but if there's a cure," he began, thinking of all the other Madelaines out there.

The doctor held up a tipsy forefinger. "That was 50 years ago," he went on, "The creature is reported to be extinct. I'm sorry."

Connery sobered up and left Solomon's Reach and investigated how many people across the Thousand Worlds were currently suffering from Hartmann's disease. The answer was a dozen, eight women and four men. He discovered that the sun of Tartarus was due to nova in just seven years, but booked passage anyway.

"I arrived and made enquiries, followed leads and red herrings and finally found people who had actually seen the last remaining Vulpheous." He paused, then went on, "So for the sakes of the people now suffering from Hartmann's disease, I must return to Earth with the liver of the Vulpheous. From it, we might be able to synthesize a drug to combat the disease. It's the least I can do. I might not be able to save Madelaine... but at least I can stop the suffering of others like her."

They remained sitting on the rock for an hour or more, holding each other like the survivors of some shipwreck. At last Leona pulled away, squeezing his fingers, and walked slowly down to the lake. Connery watched her, his heart heavy, as she sat cross-legged and bowed her head.

As the night came to an end and the horizon brightened with the blinding white dazzle of the new day, Connery returned to the dome. He opaqued the wall, lay on his bed and traced the wound that ran from his chest to his belly. He heard the inner door open, and Leona as she moved through the dome to his room. He saw her back-pack on the floor, and beside it her pouches of powders, and he assumed she was returning for these, before leaving.

She paused briefly in the entrance, staring through the half-light at him, then crossed the chamber and lay beside him on the bed. Connery took her in his arms in silence, afraid that a word from him might break their uneasy truce.

Leona took to spending the hours of sunset on the slab of rock overlooking the lake where she had originally pitched her tent, cross-legged and head bowed, but not repeating the mantra of the Summoning. Connery tended his machinery every day, and every morning swam out to check the position of *ultarrak*. She was afraid that if she summoned the healer, and it came, then he might kill it with his weapon of light.

Today she bowed her head and wept at her dilemma.

She loved Connery. They were One, after all. She had sealed their bond with the joining of the wounds, and since then life with him was better than anything she had ever experienced. They made love at every sleep period, and as night fell and her fever took command, Connery mixed the powders and held her as she drank and felt relief. But there was a distance between them, a divide that separated them as well as any sea. She understood why Connery wanted to kill *ultarrak*, to save the victims of a disease among the stars, because he had been unable to save his wife. But he did not understand why she could not allow him to kill *ultarrak*, why the creature was important to her – and that was her fault. She had to tell him... He had asked, questioned her as to what she was doing here, why she had to remain for months, but Leona had been unable to tell him the truth: would he still want her, if he knew?

But she *had* to tell him. There was no other way. He could spurn her if he so wished, and she would learn of the man he really was, or he could accede to her needs and agree not to kill *ultarrak*.

In a burst of resolve she jumped up from the rock and set off around the lake to where Connery was working among his awkward, angular devices. By the time she reached the canopy, though, her resolve had almost dissipated. She stood in the shadow, hugging her shoulders, as he knelt with his broad back to her, oblivious of her presence. At last she cleared her throat, and he turned and smiled at her.

He made to return to his work, but Leona said, "We must talk."

He laid down a metal tool, wiped his hands on his shorts and nodded. They sat facing each other beneath the canopy, his gaze making her blush.

Unable to look him in the eye, she said, "You must not kill *ultarrak*."

"Leona?" He reached out and took her chin in his hand, lifted her head so that she had to look at him. "What are you doing here? What does the Vulpheous mean to you?"

She pulled back her head, freed herself of his fingers, but held his gaze. "Do you love me, Connery?"

"I... you know I do." He looked steadily at her, and she could discern no hint of a lie in his expression.

"Then if you love me, you cannot kill *ultarrak*."

"Leona...?"

"If *ultarrak* dies, I die—"

"You're not making sense. What do you mean?" His face was full of anger and confusion, but fear also.

She stared at her fingers, busy with the hem of her dress, and tried to think of the words to tell this off-worlder, this man she loved, so that he would not think any less of her.

"Many years ago," she said, raising her eyes, "there was not one *ultarrak*, but hundreds. They lived among the islands of the south seas. Each tribe kept an *ultarrak*, except they did not keep one, exactly, but rather it was there when it was needed. It came when summoned, and it healed."

At this, Connery's eyes widened. "Healed?"

"When people were so sick that normal herbs and prayers could not heal them, when they were possessed by death-demons, the *ultarrak* was summoned and the sick person would be taken."

He was shaking his head. She went on, "The sick person enters the *ultarrak* through its *vathar*—" She indicated the top of her head, "—where it blows water. There is a chamber in there and the sick person sleeps for a year and is healed by the *ultarrak*. I have never met anyone healed this way, but my mother, and her mother, knew people who were."

"You enter its blow-hole?" he said, staring at her. "And you stay in there for a year? But what about food, air...?"

"My mother said that you sleep so deeply that you do not breathe, and *ultarrak* shares its blood with you through tentacles that heal. And after a year or more, you return to the tribe in full health."

Connery said a word she did not understand in his own language, then reached out and took her hand. "And you are sick?" he asked her, "and need the *ultarrak* to heal you?"

She nodded and lowered her eyes. "I am possessed by a powerful spirit in here—" She touched her temple. "It will kill me soon if I cannot summon *ultarrak*. My people could do nothing for me. They even took me to the off-worlders who were arranging our evacuation, but they too could do nothing. Only *ultarrak* can save me, Connery, and it cannot save me if you kill it."

His reaction was surprising. He stood and pulled her to her feet, and with his arms around her shoulders hurried her up the slope towards the dome. Once inside he sat her on the bed and rushed about the room in search of something. He found it – a flat board from which hung lengths of material like leather thongs. He knelt before her, fumbling in his haste, and tied the thongs around her right arm. She started and gasped – it was as if a thousand ants were nibbling her skin, but he told her not to worry.

He poked the board with his fingers, and strange shapes glowed on its surface. He peered at these with fevered eyes, muttering to himself in his own language. She wanted to tell him not to worry, that *ultarrak* would heal her – that if the other off-worlders could not save her, then neither could he.

Then suddenly his activity ceased. Slowly, he unwound the stinging thongs from her arm, leaving stripes of blood on her brown skin. When he looked at her, she saw tears in his eyes.

She stroked his hair. "Connery, do not worry what your board says. *Ultarrak* will take me and make me well."

He lay with her on the bed, stroking her hair and saying her name, and then many other words she could not understand. She could tell by the tone of his voice

that he was trying not to cry. How like a man!

For the first time in days, Leona felt at peace. Connery loved her, and would not kill *ultarrak*, and in time she would be healed.

He could not let Leona see his consternation. He kissed her and left her on the bed, then hurried from the dome and stormed down the slope to the water's edge. He wanted to scream, to yell to the non-existent gods that it was so unfair. Madelaine had been taken from him, and now Leona... He cursed and tried not to weep, but the effort made his throat burn with contained emotion, and eventually he sat down by the lake and wept.

The diagnosis was that Leona was dying from a neurological disorder known by a dozen different names throughout the Thousand Worlds. There was no cure. Victims rarely lasted for more than three months. The diagnosis gave Leona no more than a few weeks. He cast his mind back to Madelaine's death, and wondered how he had managed to overcome so numbing a tragedy, and how he might triumph over this one.

What compounded his pain was Leona's own reaction – her childish faith in an ancient folk-tale. She really believed that she could be cured by the Vulpheous. But how might such a cure be possible? How might she survive for a year within the blow-hole of the creature? It was, surely, no more than primitive superstition... And yet, he said to himself, what if her naive faith proved justified, and the Vulpheous could indeed effect her recovery?

Connery sat beside the lake for what seemed like hours, going over his options. He told himself again and again that it could not be true, that someone as vital and alive as Leona could not be dying... He stared into the sky, at the clouds corrupted by the imminent nova. In time the sun would blow, destroying everything: the planet, the island, the Vulpheous... Could he risk not getting the cure out to the Thousand Worlds, for the hopeless belief in a primitive folk-tale?

At last he left the lake and retraced his steps back to the dome. Leona was still on the bed, and she turned and smiled at him as he entered the chamber. He sat down beside her and stroked the hair from her forehead. He stared at her in silence, touching the line of her jaw. Her brown eyes watched him, so bright and alive.

Later, her convulsions began. As she lay on the bed with her eyes closed, shivering, Connery mixed the powders into the blood-red syrup that would make her still. He sat with her in his arms and raised the cup to her lips, and he rejoiced in her relief as her body relaxed and her breathing became even. He lowered her head to the pillow, kissed her on the lips, and then left the dome.

He stood beneath the fiery sky and stared out across the jade green lake, asking himself over and over if he had made the right decision.

Connery was standing beneath the canopy when the Vulpheous made its next appearance. The sun had set on another searing day, and the sombre tone of the night sky turned the surface of the lake a dark, brooding shade of emerald.

He was barely aware of the first lethargic ripple that disturbed the surface of the lake, so lost was he in his thoughts. Then a series of slow bubbles exploded through the layer of algae.

The Vulpheous rose to the surface with a slow, wallowing buoyancy. Its massive head turned slowly towards Connery, its tiny eyes seeking him out. It remained staring at him for what seemed like a long time.

Connery slipped into the seat behind the cannon, reached out and struck the command.

The laser flashed out, striking the creature through the forehead, and the natural amphitheatre rang to the piercing shriek of the dying animal. Already the harpoons and grapple had found their fleshy target and were hauling the dead Vulpheous across the lake to the shore. It beached with a lifeless shudder, its inert mass of blubber already discharging reeking fluids across the volcanic rock.

Connery set to work, lasering the carcass into sections and slicing free its massive liver. He transferred the organ to his waiting carrycase, then made his way back to the dome. He showered to rid himself of its blood and stench, and was leaving the dome for the last time when he paused. On the floor was Leona's pack, and beside it her pouches of medicine powders, among them the pouch that had contained the white powder, the *fehna*, empty now.

He left the dome with the carrycase. Soon, he told himself, thanks to what he had achieved here in the volcano, many people around the Thousand Worlds would give thanks to him, would be able to look into the future with hope renewed.

For every advance there was a sacrifice.

On his way up the slope he paused by the cairn of stones beneath which Leona lay.

Before he began the long trek from the volcano to the cove where his yacht was anchored, Connery knelt beside the cairn, closed his eyes and asked for her forgiveness.



**Eric Brown** is the author of 15 previous solo stories for *Interzone* plus four collaborations (three with Keith Brooke and one with Stephen Baxter). His most recent book is a children's sf novel in the "Web" series from Orion/Dolphin. He continues to live in Haworth, West Yorkshire, where he plays football.

**N**ews of Arthur C. Clarke's New Year knighthood for "services to literature" caused fans to reflect again on the prophetic power of sf: Robert Conquest's *A World of Difference* (1955) is set near 2010 and features "that most distinguished and exclusive of all bodies, the Interplanetary Society. Its ninety-odd-years-old Honorary President, the legendary 'Sir Arthur', was one of the guests..." Meanwhile, which of the usual suspects could be next for honours? No doubt Ladbroke's will soon announce their long-term odds on Sir Brian Aldiss, Sir Iain Banks, Sir Terry Pratchett, Sir Iain M. Banks...

## THE SHUBSHUB RACE

**Owen Barfield**, once a member of the Inklings group (with Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams), died in December aged 99. He wrote a good deal about Anthroposophy, plus a children's fantasy called *The Silver Trumpet*, and had considerable influence on Lewis and Tolkien.

**Stephen Baxter** was downcast that *Playboy* didn't after all run their photo of him (see *IZ* 126); but took heart when Californian book dealer Barry R. Levin, impartially and with no thoughts about spare Baxter stock to shift, declared him the winner of an award as 1997's Most Collectable Author. Pausing only to collect himself, Mr Baxter mused: "So there is a strategy behind small print runs...."

**Malcolm Edwards** has moved from his awesome position of not-quite-total power at HarperCollins UK to become managing director (and Publisher of Trade Books) at Orion.

**Tom Holt** evidently pines to appear in Thog's department: "After all, a Masterclass citation is one of the highest honours our community can bestow, comparable to a posthumous VC, or being top of the bill at the Coliseum on Caesar's birthday."

**John Norman's** 1988 letter to an admiring fan remains timeless: "As you know most science-fiction fans are still very young. Most have certainly not reached their full sexual maturity. Similarly, the sorts of things to which many of them are attracted, e.g. space ships, ray guns, etc, or, say, magic, sorcerers, dragons, etc, are quite alien to the Gorean books, which are, on the whole at least, extremely realistic. Similarly, the Gorean books are not simple action novels. They are also intellectual novels, philosophical and psychological novels. This puts them in a different category from the average science-fiction or adventure fantasy story..." In short, and who can doubt it, "The Gorean books are written for highly intelligent, highly sexed adults."

## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

**Anne Rice**, secret mistress of good taste, has licensed a t-shirt which no fan can miss – silk-screened with an MRI image of her brain.

**Nicholas Royle**, lauded last issue as a finalist in the *Literary Review's* Bad Sex competition (for a scene in *The Matter of the Heart*), was indeed the winner. The trophy, "a beautiful statue by Amelia Gatacre suggestive of bad sex," was to be presented by Stephen Fry, who – having dictated the day of the presentation – forgot to turn up and went to Toronto instead.

**Andy Sawyer** of the SF Foundation reckoned that the recent *Babylon 5* Academic Conference had a certain something ... "The sight of hardened academics telling each other *Babylon 5* 'chicken crossing the road' jokes and voting whether they liked Delenn was curiously heartwarming."

**Richard Vernon**, who played Slartibartfast in both the original *Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* radio series and its TV incarnation, died on 6 December.

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Publishers & Sinners.** Martha Soukup, until now the co-organizer of *Wired* magazine's "Head Space" online sf chat shows, tells me of another *Wired* empire cutback: "Guess what! You were the first and last British 'Head Space' guest. HotWired laid off so many people no one was left to be in charge of us – anyway we were the last fragment of the chat program that was so wildly ambitious, that they sank so many programming decades into, only a year ago."

**Marvel Comics** is still in trouble, with parent company Marvel Entertainment being taken away from its directors and put under control of a neutral trustee ... a move opposed by stockholders but urged by the secured creditors, who are owed \$812 million.

**Epitaphs.** I hereby call a halt to news items about the celebrity death of last year, after mentioning Harlan Ellison's feisty response when asked for a soundbite: "Yesterday, a ferry boat leaving Haiti sunk and 300 people died, drowned, as the boat capsized. But a tragedy was avoided when they discovered that none of them on board was a Princess."

**Birthday Boys.** Arthur C. Clarke turned 80 in December. As his famous Third Law states, "Any sufficiently advanced birthday is indistinguishable from magic." It was left to Tony Blair to think of a suitable present.... Also 80 in December was Ken Slater of Fantast (Medway) Ltd – a British sf book-dealer ever since 1947 – who proudly reported over 70 years of reading sf.

**Fangs of Fantasy ...** the 1997 World Fantasy Con has opened legal action against Reading book dealer Christopher Barker, who grumpily stopped payment on his membership cheque after being "forced to miss the evening performance of Bram Stoker's prologue to *Dracula: or The Un-Dead* because it started later than scheduled and he had to get home." This one could run and run.

**Starburst** magazine celebrated 20 years of publication at the end of 1997.

**Twenty Years Ago.** From an sf fan newsletter of yore: "Meanwhile, in the sercon strongholds of the SF Foundation, Malcolm Edwards has replaced Peter Nicholls as boss, and David Pringle has moved in as an Igor figure. [...] Harlan Ellison plans to sleep in a tent at Iguanacon for political reasons. Look, don't ask me, I just print the bloody news." (Peter Roberts, *Checkpoint* 86, 1978)

**The Smell of Fandom.** Members of the New England SF Association, who had expressed ecological concern for the welfare of the skunk that lives around and under their Massachusetts clubhouse, were recently reassured by a truly appalling stench that permeated clubhouse and environs....

**Thog's Masterclass.** "She trotted over to the car, her footsteps echoing like a noisy shadow." ... "But Hollis's bloodlust would not be denied: he was going to snap the faggot's head off his shoulders, and then watch the blood spurt like cancerous semen." (both Carl Huberman, *Eminent Domain*, 1996) ... "He wanted to [...] put his tongue between her legs and watch her eyes roll back." (Rupert Thomson, *The Five Gates of Hell*, 1991) ... "For a split second, Strider's stomach was at least fifty metres above her prone body." (John Grant, *Strider's Galaxy*, 1996. "That was a deliberate joke," said the pained author....)

“*C*lock-a-cley, clock-a-cley...” Piera croons the old country tune to herself as she picks golden dandelions in the field behind Mam’s cottage. The bitter white juice leaking from their stems stains her fingers.

And then she hears the music. It seems to float on the breeze, light as dandelion seeds.

The dandelions drop from her lap as she stumbles to her feet, moving through the high grass towards the source of the music. It draws her. She must find it. She must be part of it.

A lady is standing in front of the cottage. A stranger. She plays the notes softly, coaxing the sounds with slender fingers from a glittering artefact woven from strands of glass.

Piera comes running down to her, curious.

“You must be Piera.”

Piera gazes up at her. The lady is thin and tall, with a smooth, pale face and eyes grey as a cloudy sky. She is staring at her oddly; Piera turns away, disturbed by the intensity of the strange lady’s stare.

“Do you know this melody, Piera?”

Piera nods. She has known it all her life. She has heard it in dreams. She has heard it in the still, dark hour before dawn. But never before has she heard it played aloud.

“Can you sing it to me?”

The notes cease... but Piera takes them up again, filling the silence with her own clear, piping voice.

“Piera!” Mam comes into the garden. Her face is twisted, distorted. She grabs hold of Piera. “I told you. Never talk to strangers.”

Piera does not understand. She was singing, not talking.

“Why! Why now!” Mam almost spits the words at the lady.

“Because she is ready.” The tall lady speaks softly. “You knew we would be back one day.”

Mam hugs Piera, hugs her so tightly that Piera can hardly breathe.

“B – but not so soon.” Her face is wet with tears.

“What’s wrong, Mam?” Piera asks, smothered in Mam’s arms.

“This lady – has come to take you away.”

“Why?” Piera does not understand. “Have I been bad? Don’t you want me, Mam?”

Mam chokes on her tears.

“She – she’s taking you to a much better place. A holy place. It’s a great honour, Piera.”

“I want to stay here. With you, Mam.”

The lady comes forward, places one slender hand on Piera’s head, smoothing her hair. “You’re a very special little girl, Piera.”

“No!” screams Piera.

“I want to go home.” Piera sobs. After two days’ travel she is still weeping, still inconsolable. “Take me home to my Mam.”

“This is your home now, Piera.” The lady, Eidala, speaks softly to her yet Piera can hear behind the soft words that there will be no gainsaying her.

“I hate it here. I hate it.”

# Merveille

Sarah  
Ash

“You never knew your father, did you?”

Father. The word means little to Piera.

There are few men left in Ar’Mor. Ever since the Inondation when the sea swallowed the land, Mam told her, boy children are born weak, often die before they reach Piera’s age.

“You’re a very special girl. You are a child of the Avatar.”

Piera takes a halting breath between sobs. “Avatar?”

“I am a child of the Avatar too.”

Eidala takes the little girl into the Celestial Hall.

Piera’s sobs cease. They walk into a faery palace, an enchanted place created of glass crystal, dully sparkling like falling rain. The Hall gently vibrates, caressing Piera with sounds.

And through the shimmering rods of rain-crystal, she glimpses the figure of a man, a blue shadow in the darkness.

“Who is that?” she whispers.

“That is the Avatar,” says Eidala, smiling. “Come. Look.”

They stand gazing up at the statue of the Avatar. His long sculpted hair is blue, like the sea. He gazes back at his daughters, a half-smile on his painted lips. On his brow is a bee, a blue bee. Piera remembers the blue bees busy in the sea holly as they climbed the winding cliff path to the Merveille.

Eidala tells the little girl the story of how the Avatar saved the people from the sea. How he built the Merveille to control the wild tides, promising that as long as the great crystalline Construct was kept in tune with the harmony of the moving planets overhead, there would never be a second Inondation. How he chose the first of the Dominas and taught them to play the spun-glass tendrils and rods of the Construct, to weave the intricate patterns in pitch and prolation that keep the tides at bay.

The long words mean nothing to Piera; her eyes wander, she hears only the sound of Eidala’s voice, murmuring on and on.

Eidala leads her to the window overlooking the bay.

“Look. Look at the way the tide comes rushing back over the quicksands. If the Construct were not in con-

stant movement, do you know what would happen?"

Piera shakes her head.

"There would be no way to stop the flow. The tide would keep coming, the land would flood, all the people would be drowned. That is why we must keep the music as constant as the ebb and flow of the tides. That is why we serve the Avatar, why we play the instrument he created for us."

Piera stares up at the shimmering web of crystal rods.

"He made this?"

"So we are told. So we believe."

The sounds glitter in Piera's mind like the sparkle of the sun on the waves in the Bay.

"But... how does it work?"

Eidala frowns.

"We do not ask *how*. It is not for us to ask, child. We merely perform our duties to the best of our abilities."

"Could you teach me to play 'Clock-a-cley'?"

The frown deepens.

"You must forget all those crude country tunes. You must learn to hone your skills to serve the Avatar. Never forget – you are his child."

The expanse of violet waters glimmered, mirroring the twilight clouds overhead. Wherever Piera looked, she could see nothing but the sea... and the far-distant sky. The tides of the bay perpetually ebbed and flowed around the rock, the Mont on which the Merveille stood. Sometimes when the tides were at low ebb, the wide quicksands were revealed, veined with trickling silver-currents.

To stand at the high windows of the Celestial Hall, was to stand on the prow of a great ship breasting the waves.

The glass strands and spirals of the great Construct towered above Piera, vibrating to the deft touch of Domina Eidala, as she had heard them, day and night without cease, for the past twelve years.

"Twelve," Piera whispered to the coming night. "Twelve years."

Twelve planets in the celestial canon; twelve notes in the musical scale; so twelve Dominas must make the endless patterning that ensured the harmony of the spheres, day and night, lest the pattern be broken. And now she had served twelve long years as Domina Eidala's Scholar, years in which the memory of Mam, dear Mam, had become as faint as windblown dandelion clocks... yet the pain of the parting was still as bitter to her as the juice from the dandelion stems...

Piera glanced at Domina Eidala and saw her mistress's face set in a slight frown, eyes fixed on some far distant point, unseeing. She wondered if she could ever achieve the level of deep concentration required to sustain two hours of improvisation without once breaking the sacred sequence.

The touch of the fingers upon the glass strands was the first of the skills to be acquired; too soft a touch and the glass failed to vibrate at all, too hard – and breakages occurred. Piera winced at the memory, fingering the hard scar-scab on her right palm.

So much to learn... so much to remember.

Piera watched the tide begin to creep back across the darkening sands from the bournes of the purpled horizon... a thin line of silver etched against the coming night, it seemed to move with the notes Domina Eidala was

weaving: some high and translucent as the glass from which they were spun, some low and humming, buzzing. Piera began to feel the vibrations in her own body.

And then the fast-approaching tide and the growing surge of music became one and she was immersed, drowning in the physical sensation of pure sound.

Night swept across the bay like the wings of a dark bird.

Piera started up. She had been dreaming when she should have been lighting the Celestial Hall. The crystal rods and strands glittered dully in the darkness as she took a taper and went from sconce to sconce to light the candles. Domina Eidala played on, oblivious. To break her trance now would be as dangerous as waking a sleep-walker.

Piera extinguished her taper and sat down in the window seat to wait. Below, the dark tide had reached the foot of the Merveille; waves slapped and splashed against the rocks.

Domina Casna appeared out of the shadows, her Scholar following meekly behind her.

Eidala brought the improvisation to a conclusion and Casna took over, stating the Invocation for early evening.

Eidala staggered as if she might fall; Piera took her arm to steady her.

"Careful, Domina. Lean on me."

Eidala looked ill and old; her face had become grey with weariness. After their part in the daily ritual, the Dominas often emerged drained, exhausted.

"A draught of the Elixir will restore me."

"Yes, yes." Piera slowly led Eidala back towards her chambers in the Tower of Prolation, feeling Eidala's steps faltering. There had been little enough left of the Elixir yesterday; she hoped there was enough to restore Eidala's strength today.

The bottle was thick black glass, stained with a sticky crust around the neck. Piera removed the ancient cork and took a sniff of the liquid within: the aroma from within was darkly honeyed yet pungent with the aromatic bitterness of cliff herbs.

"Piera. *The Elixir*." Eidala sat slumped in her chair; the hand she extended shook uncontrollably. Piera carefully poured a measure of the pale, clear liqueur and placed it in the Domina's hand, guiding it to her lips. Eidala gulped it down... and as Piera watched, the shaking slowly ceased and the colour returned to Eidala's face.

"There's not much left now, Domina."

"Show me."

Piera brought the bottle to Eidala who shook it, tipping it and peering inside to gauge the level.

"You'll have to go to the Bee-Keeper on the dunes. I'll ask the Arch-Domina for a written permission."

"Why the Bee-Keeper?"

The aromatic sweet scent of the Elixir made Piera's mouth water; she took back the bottle and hastily stoppered it tight.

"Because that... is where the Elixir is made..."

"Domina –" Piera stopped. Eidala's eyelids had closed; she would sleep now. Piera placed the bottle back on the shelf.

Every Domina took a daily measure of the Elixir: it cleared the brain of distracting thoughts, it heightened their mental faculties, enabling them to concentrate fully upon their sacred duty. Was Eidala exceptional in

taking two measures? Piera had heard all manner of rumours about the strange habits of the Dominas from the other Scholars but she suspected most of the tales they told were pure malice, designed to alarm and confuse. She was, after all, the youngest.

A mere girl.

Cold, crystalline sounds floated from the Merveille across the bay. Piera walked down the causeway that led from the Merveille to the dunes, carrying the empty bottle. The music shimmered like sun on the sea. It swooped and darted with the flight of the cormorants overhead. It was perpetual like the ebb and flow of the tides. It had always been there. It always would be.

Until this moment, she had forgotten what it felt like to be free of the rituals of the Merveille, to feel the soft sand beneath her feet...

Gulls were picking around the driftwood in the marram grass. Piera kicked off her shoes and went running down the dunes, arms lifted, just as if she were seven again. Startled, the gulls lifted into the air with raucous cries.

And then she stopped. A boy was gathering driftwood, bending down to examine the sea-bleached branches.

The boy straightened up and gave her a long, appraising look, eyes narrowed against the glare off the water. His face was freckled, burned by the sun; his tousled hair was the brown of tide-wet sand. The pale eyes, blue as the sea, had an astuteness that made her suddenly stammer, forgetting what she had come for.

"Domina Eidala sent me. To see the Bee-Keeper."

He said nothing. He just gazed at her through lids half-narrowed against the sun's dazzle.

"Is – is she in?"

"I am the Bee-Keeper."

"You?" He could not be much older than she, 18, 19 summers, maybe. Was he teasing her? Piera stared back at him suspiciously.

"Is that so very surprising? My mother died three months ago. I have taken over her work." He turned and began to walk away across the dunes towards the cottage.

"I was just surprised to see –"

"A man? So near the Merveille?" He glanced back at her, the sea-pale eyes wary, almost hostile. "The Arch-Domina disapproves most strongly, I'm told. But the Elixir is a family secret – and I am the only surviving member of my family."

As they neared the cottage, Piera became aware of a distant droning hum. Sea-holly grew on the sandy soil and amongst its silvered spines, she saw movement: the trembling of translucent blue wings.

"Blue bees." She ventured a closer look then flinched back. "Sacred bees."

"Have you never seen them before?" His tone was still dismissive, as though incredulous that Piera should be so ignorant.

"Once," she said, remembering that long-ago journey, exhaustedly traipsing across the dunes after Domina Eidala. "I was only a child."

"They harvest the pollen from the sea-holly. But then I suppose you're too concerned with your music to notice what goes on outside the Merveille."

Ouch, Piera said to herself. He was as prickly in manner as the sea-holly.

Bee skeps stood in the cottage garden, between untidy clumps of herbs; a constant buzz overhead made Piera nervous as the bees travelled between the sea-holly and the skeps.

"What do they call you? Other than Bee-Keeper?"

"My mother named me Morien. For my father. He died before I was born."

Piera stooped to follow him into the cottage; bunches of sweet herbs hung up to dry brushed her head.

"Isn't it lonely? Here all by yourself?"

The Bee-Keeper fetched a black bottle identical to the one she had brought; as he placed it on the table, he looked up and met her gaze.

"Why should it be lonely? I have your music to listen to, all day, all night."

Morien opened a ledger and took up a pen, tracing through the records to find Domina Eidala's name. Piera saw him hesitate.

"This will be the third bottle since Year's End. How much is she taking?"

"Two measures a day."

A cloud seemed to pass across his pale eyes.

"And you? Have you started to take the Elixir?"

"Me?" Piera felt herself blush. "No. I'm not advanced enough yet in my training. It is not permitted until one has mastered all the techniques of Prolation."

"When it is time," he said, regarding her, "you must come back here to the cottage. Do not allow Domina Eidala to share her Elixir with you; the purest distillation is not suitable for novices. My mother always kept a more dilute Elixir for the youngest Scholars."

"Why?" Piera heard herself asking.

"It can have... unfortunate effects. I heard Domina Maela died last month."

"They said she caught a fever. Inflammation of the lungs. She was weak, susceptible to the damp."

"They would say that." Morien closed the ledger and set it back on the shelf.

Piera stared at him, mouth open. Was he warning her? Or just teasing her, like the other Scholars, because she was the youngest?

"I start with our twilight invocation, so..." Eidala dipped her finger-tips in sea-water, gently stroking the spun-glass strands till they began to resonate. "Spring Twilight. Now you, Piera. Wait until each pitch has begun to die before setting the next in vibration – remember?"

Piera, biting her inner lip in concentration, repeated the sequence Eidala had played. Each pitch glowed like a resonating sphere in the Celestial Chamber: in her mind, they took on different hues, luminous colours of dusk.

"Now that you have established the order of the twelve pitches, you begin to work around them. Go on... go on..."

What was hardest: to sustain the invocation so that it was repeated without cease, each note in its correct place – or to weave the complex patterns around it? Piera felt her brain would burst from the effort – as her fingers flew from strand to strand.

*Drone of blue-winged bees amongst the spiked petals of the sea-holly.*

"Keep the pitches resonating. Break the sequence – and you destroy the sanctity of the rite."

*Drowsy drone of bees, the soft fuzz on their bodies blue as cobalt, darker indigo on the underbelly...*

Piera's mind lost focus for a second. Her fingers slipped, she grabbed wildly for the nearest strand – and there was a sharp snap. Pain scissored into her palm. She yelped – and saw blood dripping onto the clear purity of the glass.

Domina Eidala let out a sigh and leaned across Piera's shoulder, to set another strand of the same pitch in motion. The Invocation had only faltered for a few seconds...

"I'm sorry, so sorry." Piera put her cut hand to her mouth, trying to soothe the jagged pain.

"Perhaps – I have been forcing you – too fast –" Eidala spoke softly, timing each phrase to fit between the notes.

"No. I was clumsy." Piera tried to staunch the bleeding with her kerchief.

"It's just – that – I feared – there was not – enough time."

Piera's head jerked up, the pain momentarily forgotten. "Domina?"

"I – have not been – well. When I die –"

"No, Domina!" Piera burst out,

"When I die," repeated Eidala, "you – will become Domina in my place. But you – still have much – to learn –" Her face looked so pinched, so pale that Piera feared she was about to faint. "I – have tried to – keep you from the – Elixir. Now there is – no other alternative –"

"But if it will help me improve," Piera burst out eagerly, "if it will sharpen my mental faculties–"

Eidala's dulled eyes lit up a moment in the gloom.

"Believe me, Piera, I would have waited much, much longer before exposing you to its effects. But my sacred duty impells me. The Ceaseless Round must continue unbroken... and you must be ready to take my place."

In the dim light reflected from the crystal strands, Piera saw how the shadows emphasised Eidala's skeletal frailty; her face a sea-bleached skull, the dull eyes sunken deep in their sockets.

This, a voice whispered in Piera's head, is the result of endless years of service to the sacred rite, this slow wearing away of the body until only the mind remains acute.

And then she became aware of the way the old woman was looking at her above the crystal strands.

*Help me, Piera.*

"I'll go back to the Bee-Keeper, Domina. I'll go as soon as you have finished."

Night had fallen by the time Piera set out across the dunes. Behind her the Merveille glimmered, a silver citadel, against the moonlit sea.

Piera stopped, sniffing.

The salty air was filled with woodsmoke... sweetsmoke that breathed honeyed spices, not burning driftwood.

And against the distant shimmer of the Ceaseless Round that emanated from the Merveille, another sound was counterpointed, a sound that made her stop, glancing nervously around: the buzzing of bees. This was not the drowsy drone of bees in a summer meadow... this was a vibration as deep and as visceral as that of the deepest glass strands of the Construct.

But if you come to visit the Bee-Keeper, she told her-

self, you must expect to find bees.

Flame flared up behind the cottage...

Against the moonpale sky, a great cloud of bees hovered...

The Bee-Keeper was in the glade. And he was dancing, barefoot on the dew-wet grass, his arms moving in some ritual pattern, dancing in the curling woodsmoke to a repetitive rhythm of his own making.

As Piera crept closer, he began to sing. The song was unknown to her, half humming, half ululating, an ancient, wordless chant that made her skin crawl. And as he sang, a column of bees began to weave about his head, his arms, his body, snaking in and out of his slow-moving, graceful gestures, spiralling out like ribbons of star-spun indigo.

He gave a little shrug and the loose loin-cloth he was wearing slid to the grass.

Piera stifled a cry.

*Avatar.*

Still droning the wordless chant, he spun naked in the moonlit smoke, moving in the ever-shifting cloud of dancing bees.

This was bee-magic, more ancient, more potent than the cerebral music of the Dominas. She should not be watching. If he knew she was spying on him, he would loose the bees onto her, she would be stung to an agonizing death–

She began to back away through the tufts of marram grass, one step at a time.

Yet even as she entered the Merveille the notes of his song and the deep drone of the bees still resonated deep in her mind, her body, obscuring the endlessly-shifting patterns of the glass music of the Construct.

Eidala lay so still that Piera feared the old Domina was already dead; but when she bent close over her, she could still feel a faint whisper of air issuing from her lips.

The encrusted bottle of Elixir stood on the shelf.

Piera reached out for it – then let her hand drop. The undiluted Elixir, Morien had said, was fit only for Dominas long-used to its potency. It would sharpen her mental faculties, it would suppress all fleshly desires and distractions, leaving her mind clear to concentrate on the Ceaseless Round.

She glanced back guiltily at her sleeping mistress. Eidala had not stirred. Her skin, in the moonlight, looked as frail as silvered honesty.

Sleep could only heal, bringing the old Domina renewed strength for the next day.

"Sleep well, Domina," Piera whispered as she crept into her own bed.

Dusk was falling. Domina Eidala was still asleep. Piera cautiously approached her bed. It was time to go to the Celestial Hall.

"Domina," she said softly. The old woman did not stir. Piera repeated her name louder. Piera leaned closer and tapped Eidala's arm. Still there was no response.

Piera put her hand on the old woman's shoulder – and her mistress's body slipped slowly sideways.

Piera felt panic rising in her throat, a choking panic. No. Not dead. Please not dead.

She forced himself to listen at the old woman's mouth, felt for a pulse. Eidala's wrist felt cold, dry as

a length of knotted rope.

There was no sign of life.

"No," Piera said, backing away, one step at a time, eyes fixed on Eidala's still, slack face. "No. No."

Eidala had abandoned her before she was ready to take her part in the Celestial Round.

Tears slid down her cheeks, tears for dead Eidala, tears for herself, left to carry on the traditions of the House of Twilight alone.

"I can't do it."

The setting sun slid from beneath the storm clouds, filling the room with unnatural light, gilding the skeletal face.

It was time.

Piera, hands shaking, took the bottle of Elixir down from the shelf and poured a measure, swallowing it in one gulp.

The Elixir burned her throat with an almost unbearable sweetness: honey and fire, mingled. A dizzying swirl of blue bees swarmed across her vision. Piera gasped, clutching her spinning head.

She opened her eyes. Her mind felt clear, as though acid had burned away all extraneous thoughts. She could hear the music from the Celestial Hall so acutely now that each tone was uniquely differentiated from the others; each pitch as bright and vivid as a bee-sting.

She opened the chamber door and beckoned to a passing servant-woman.

"Domina Eidala is dead." She could hear her own voice as if from a great distance away. "Tell the Arch-Domina. I must go take her place in the Celestial Hall."

Piera's hands trembled so much she could hardly achieve more than the slightest vibration in the slender glass.

*For Domina Eidala*, she told herself.

She never knew at what moment the fear left her. The patterning of the notes obsessed her utterly. She made them change, each brightly-coloured sound bright as shifting glass fragments in a child's kaleidoscope. The Celestial Hall grew dim as the sun set... but the notes glowed on in Piera's mind, shifting constellations of stars pricked out in sound against the dark night sky.

At last she understood. The obsession – and the compulsion. She could not wait for twilight to fall again the next day – she could not wait to take her place again in the Construct and lose herself in the music.

Eidala's body was given back to the sea. Piera was now Domina in her place, the youngest Domina on the Mont. There had been mutterings and envious looks from the other, older Scholars. Some had criticised her competence, one had even implied that Eidala's death might not have been due to natural causes.

The Arch-Domina summoned Piera to her chambers.

"There have been rumours," she said. "Is there any truth in them?"

"I loved Domina Eidala!" cried Piera, furious at the implication. "She was always good to me. I didn't want to become Domina so soon –"

"Yes, yes." The Arch-Domina raised one hand to quell her outburst. "But just to silence the slanderers, I have removed the Elixir from your chambers to have it tested for poison. A formality, you understand."

Removed the Elixir! Piera hardly heard the accusation;

she only felt the trembling in her hands begin again. How could she take her part tonight without the Elixir?"

"The Bee-Keeper will give you a distillation more suited to your young years. Eidala burned herself out. Take care that you do not do the same."

"Look at me. In the eyes. Don't blink."

The Beekeeper took hold of Piera's face between his hands; his fingers, slender yet firm, pressed into her cheeks as he gazed into her eyes.

Somewhere at the back of her mind was a vague recollection, as if seen down a long, dark tunnel, a memory of a smoke-wreathed boy moving slowly, seductively within a spiral of spinning bees... The image stirred some faint disturbing sensation within her.

He released her and the sensation ceased.

"You didn't listen to me, did you? Oh, don't stare at me like that, I can tell. How much?"

"Only a few measures," she said, ashamed at being found out.

"Full-strength?"

"I tried to water it down–"

"Fool. You can't dilute it." His pale eyes were bright with anger. "Do you want to go the same way as Eidala?"

"What do you mean?"

"You have to start with the smallest measure, then slowly build. Too much too soon, and you keep wanting, needing more."

"But it works," Piera cried. "Each evening, I have been able to play for the whole two hours without once making an error."

"Oh yes, it works. It sears away all earthly desires and distractions. You'll come back in a month and see me not as a man... but a shadow. You'll forget how you felt when I touched you just now–"

Piera opened her mouth to deny – but he continued.

"You'll forget the savour of food and drink. Nothing will matter but the Celestial Round... and the Elixir."

Piera watched amazed, as Morien dipped into the skep, removed a comb dripping with honey and replaced the top. Each movement he made was slow, almost leisurely. Bees swirled around his head.

"Why don't they sting you?"

"Ah. That's my secret."

Something indefinable had changed between them; he was no longer so distant, he kept darting glances at her, brief as the brush of a bee's wing... yet somehow provocative. Challenging.

The honey from the combs in the bee-skeps was thin and dark, emitting a strange odour above the sweetness, bitter as sea-brine.

Piera sniffed. "Honey from sacred bees."

In the blue twilight he reached out to touch her face. She did not flinch away, she let him tilt her face up to his. His lips brushed hers, lips soft as bee-velvet.

*Bee-wings vibrate in the twilight, the air is filled with the drowsy beat of bee-blue wings.*

His tongue slipped between her lips... his kiss stung her mouth till her bee-swollen mouth throbbed with the pain and pleasure of it. Bee-venom burned through her body, setting every nerve-end tingling with sensations of unbearable delight.

"Morien –" She heard a voice gasp as he clasped her closer. Was it her voice? "O Morien –"

*Blue bees swirl like ribbons of star-spun indigo as he dances his slow, weaving dance. Now he moves around her, within her, she is his shadow-dancer, mirroring his slow, sinuous movements...*

The summer twilight still glowed blue over the wide bay. Piera lay curled against Morien on the grass beneath the bee-skeps.

The curling hair between her thighs smelled of that thin, dark honey with its brine-bitter afterscent.

"Kissed by a god..." she whispered.

"You wanted to see me." Piera stood before the Arch-Domina. Her sensitive stomach was queasy; she felt faint and sick.

"Your condition has not escaped my notice," the Arch-Domina said. "Oh – don't deny it, Piera. Others have commented on your pallor, your bouts of sickness."

"I'll go pack my things," Piera said resignedly.

"To go where?"

"I – I assumed you wanted me to leave, I –"

"And who would take your place? These things happen from time to time." The Arch-Domina's manner was brisk. "We have learned to accommodate to them. When is the baby due?"

"S – spring tide."

"Your place is assured here. On one condition. That you have no further contact with the father of your child. I can condone one indiscretion. Two would be intolerable. Is that understood?"

Never to see Morien again. Piera bit her underlip until she tasted blood.

"Piera," the Arch-Domina said. "Remember what Eidala told you. You are a child of the Avatar."

"My baby! My baby!" Piera starts up, her arms wide, grasping thin air.

"Ssh. Don't cry." Someone wipes her hot forehead with a wet cloth, presses her gently back down onto the bed.

"Where is she?" Piera's arms are empty. She never knew how empty till now. "What have you done with my baby?"

"Hush. It was a difficult labour. You're still weak. You must conserve your strength..."

"I want her back. I want her back now."

"You will have her. In good time. But your duty to the Avatar comes first."

"Wh – what?"

"We shall call her Eidala. After your mother. A good name."

"M – my mother?" The smoky darkness of the birthing room swirls about Piera's head; she feels dizzy and sick. Through the dizziness she makes out the sharpened features of the Arch-Domina, sharp as the cormorants that skim the Bay waters.

"Mother, daughter. We are all daughters of the Avatar. Domina Eidala told you that you were special. You could never know – till now – how special you were to her."

"My mother," Piera says again.

"It will soon be time for you to resume your place in the Ceaseless Round."

"Yes," she says dully. "But who took my place whilst

I was in labour?"

"I did," the Arch-Domina says. "It is my privilege – and my prerogative."

Mother, daughter, mother, daughter, the words whirl around Piera's brain, a sterile sequence of duty, devoid of love.

In the Celestial Hall Piera watches the tide begin to creep back across the darkening sands... a thin line of silver etched against the coming night. She gazes up at the crystalline tendrils of the Construct. Now they seem like the constricting coils of a nest of snakes, stifling her, imprisoning her, keeping her from her child.

It is the Hour of Twilight. She moves to take her place within the Construct.

No one has seen her smuggle in the stick, hidden in the thick folds of her gown.

She is ready to make a different kind of music.

The fragile glass strands shatter in a hail of shards as she whirls the stick about her head and brings it smashing down on the Construct.

"This –" she screams, "for my mother. This – for me. This – for my baby."

She is aware that the others have come running in but no one can come near her as she whirls and twirls, at the heart of the tornado of shattered glass.

And when her strength is exhausted and she stands, gasping for breath amidst the devastation she has wrought, all she can hear is the pounding pulse of her own blood in her ears.

"Piera." The Arch-Domina's voice breaks the silence, harsh as a cormorant's cry. "What have you done?"

"I'm going to find her," Piera cries. "If I have to walk the length of Ar'Mor, I'm going to find my baby. My Eidala."

But all the Dominas are staring out at the bay, at the incoming tide as it slides back towards the shore. They do not hear her. They are waiting for the sea to come crashing against the Merveille, to drown them all.

The tide comes rolling in towards the shore. Full tide. Spring tide.

Piera turns her back on the great window, on the intruding sea. She walks out of the Celestial Hall, crunching over the glittering particles of shattered glass, out of the Merveille.

She hears the waves crash against the rocks at the foot of the Merveille. She stops, bracing herself, waiting for the drowning tide to immerse her, to drag her down to oblivion.

The bay is full ... but the tide is in. This is no second Inondation.

Against the whisper of the tide Piera can hear the pitches of the Invocation imprinted in her mind. But it is unfettered now by the laws of Prolation and Perfection, it is hers to shape, to alter as she will.

The only sound now is the sound of her footsteps, slow at first, then hastening, eager, as she hurries across the dunes towards Morien's cottage.

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**Sarah Ash's** previous stories for *Interzone* were "Mothmusic" (#62), "Airs from Another Planet" (#83), and "Brief Flare" (#86). Her third novel, *Lost Child*, is due for publication imminently by Orion/Millennium. She lives in Beckenham, Kent.

# Moths in My Music

**Sarah Ash**

*interviewed by*

*David Mathew*



**I** think fantasy is important. I think it fulfils the role of the fairy tale and the myths from days gone by. It's just that now we like our fairy tales and our myths dressed up in a slightly more sophisticated way. Without wanting to sound too pompous, I see fantasy as a metaphor: as a way of looking at things which affect us now. But at a distance. Sometimes you look back to past times, but what fantasy does is put a different sort of gloss on them. For me to write a realistic book about the Stalinist purges (a subject I cover in a fantastic way in *SongspINNERS*) would be a very different piece of work; but fantasy allowed me to write about my feelings about the purges in a way that I couldn't do in any other style. But I don't want to claim I'm crusading!"

Sarah Ash and I talked about her life and work at the World Fantasy Convention in London's Docklands over the Halloween weekend, 1997. She believes that a fantasy writer's advantage over a mainstream writer is precisely that a fantasy writer has a way of tackling unpleasant subject matter in a more palatable manner. Fantasy provides the necessary distancing effect.

"But a criticism that is often hurled at fantasy is, it's an escape. And maybe it is. Maybe it's saying: we can't bear too much reality. But I don't think the books would be popular if they were just addressing a need for escapism: they look at subjects that can't be dealt with in factional terms."

Sarah is the author of two fantasy novels, *Moths to a Flame* and *SongspINNERS*. These are intelligent, unusual books, well-written and well-researched, with believable characters (male and female) engaged in tasks unlike those of more traditional fantasy heroes and heroines. For example, in the former novel, the hero, Lai, is refreshing in that his quest is simply to return home. He is not a pawn in a central premise of a goal that must be achieved. Sarah explains:

"What I didn't want to do was write something that was defined in areas of black and white. Or Good and Evil, to be more politically correct. A lot of the fantasy that I was reading dealt with the epic quest, and I didn't feel I had anything to contribute. I was always interested in the grey areas. I wanted to know how they coped on those journeys. There wasn't a public toilet on the way, presumably. I was

interested in saying: Yes, but supposing... The food's run out and you can't just nip down to the local shop. I like to know the nitty-gritty... There were writers I came back to – Storm Constantine, in particular, Ellen Kushner. I enjoyed Tad Williams, although he was still writing epic fantasy at that stage. I just thought he was writing a different kind of epic fantasy."

What many people disapproved of about fantasy is the presumed unbelievable nature of the genre; the idea of Conan (for example) riding on a horse through a blizzard with bare arms... "Yes," Sarah agrees. "But then, he's tough!"

**H**ow did she come to write the first book?

"I trained at Cambridge as a musician and I was always torn between wanting to compose music and wanting to write," she says. "I went on to teach music because I liked working with children, but also that allowed me to continue with a bit of drama and acting, which I also enjoyed. This was in the sensitive days! I was writing mainly for children at the time and came close to making it, reaching the stage of 'We liked it very much but...' And then came getting married

and having children, and that really did put a stop on things for a while. I didn't write anything for eight years. I went back to writing when the children were getting older... I had been writing fantasy in the 1970s and not getting anywhere, and then suddenly the explosion happened. We'd been living in Wales where we weren't close to bookshops, and we came back to London and I kept seeing all these fantasy books. I'd missed something! That made me start to think again about ideas I'd had earlier."

The central idea of *Moths to a Flame* is that of the moths that begin by seeming to be a force for good; but this very goodness (the dust they carry on their wings) is soon found to be addictive. It is, in many senses, an anti-drugs novel. The moths bring perturbation and despair, not to mention, eventually, plague. What gave Sarah the notion of the moth motif?

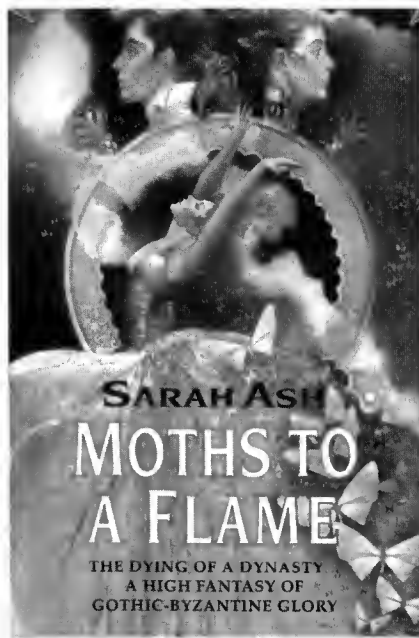
"One of my students at the time, a very gifted violinist, said to me one day, 'I hate moths.' This student would be very afraid and would squirm away if one flew into the room. That inspired the short story that was in *Interzone* ('Mothmusic') which appears about two thirds of the way through the book. The moths just appeared as a small episode but I stood back from the book when I'd finished and it seemed that they stood out; they symbolized something ambivalent. Something that could be good, but also something that could be misused, could be evil." Moths are mainly night-bound and are not as easily recognizable as good as are, say, butterflies. On the most superficial level, they are not as pretty as butterflies. Sarah says the creatures in the novel "might have been butterflies, and on the cover of the book they look like butterflies! I felt at once that they should be attractive but also that there should be some warning."

Lepidoptery also features noticeably in two other important modern texts. "I can think of one," Sarah replies. "I do think of *Silence of the Lambs*. I like the nocturnal side of the moths as well – because I do think that opens up a lot of imagery, a whole wealth of associations." In Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, a girl finds an affinity with butterflies and there is a memorable scene in which she is lying outside, completely smothered in them. "I've read *Midnight's Children* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, but I haven't read *The Satanic Verses*." Of course, part of the reading experience is appraising what we assume the author to have read and been influenced by.

"I started writing *Moths* in about 1988 and it went through a number of versions. It started off as a very different kind of fantasy; the moths didn't play a very large part in it. By the time the short story appeared in *Interzone*, I had started to look again

at the book. Even after it was accepted it went through two more rewrites before the version that came out. The ultimate version that came out was one I wasn't 100% satisfied with, but I wouldn't in any way lay the blame for this at the door of Caroline Oakley, my editor."

What sort of audience did she have in mind for *Moths to a Flame*? "I don't know. I hoped it would be for



people who enjoyed fantasy but were maybe looking for something a little bit different. Because that was how I felt. I felt there were books that I was not seeing which I think was probably one of the impulses."

One of the interesting factors of both of Sarah's novels so far is the substitution into the texts of vocabulary that is almost our vocabulary but not quite. For example, coffee is "quaffe," a dungeon is a "donjon," and alcohol is "alquer." A similar distancing technique is used in Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. ("No, sorry..." Sarah says; she hasn't read that one either. Oh well.) On the subject of this type of neologizing, Sarah has the following to say: "I've received quite a few brickbats about this. Why not call a spade a spade? In my latest book I've gone out of my way not to invent, but that's because it's a slightly different setting. I love words and I like playing about with them. In the case of 'quaffe' I got: Why don't you just call it coffee? You've called a meringue a meringue. Bringing a few words like that into *Songspinnners* was just to say, this is in the same world as *Moths*..."

Not only are Sarah's two novels set during different points of history in their mythological universe, they

were inspired by different points in history in our own. *Moths to a Flame* seems partly Ancient Greek and partly Arabic, and *Songspinnners* seems much more an 18th-century England, with its references to periwigs, among other things.

"People have thought of all sorts of periods for the books, but *Moths* is definitely much earlier on in history. I tried to write a novel about Byzantium, which hasn't seen the light of day, but almost did – and the reading I was doing then about Constantinople – that did rub off quite a great deal. I do look back into history rather than look into the near future, which will come out even more in my third novel, which has a much more historical basis. That's if anybody wants to see it!"

*Songspinnners* was a result of Sarah's love for music. What influence does music have on her writing, as opposed to on her life?

"I find it very difficult to separate the two things. I'm a pianist, but I have to say I'm not a brilliant pianist and my main interest is in composition. 1994 was the last time I wrote something that was performed – locally. Nothing big. I find music is an integral part of what I do. When I started writing as a child it was because I made pictures in my head when I listened to music, and the pictures always turned into a story. In some ways I still work along those lines. Some people don't like to work with music but I do... I've always been very interested in the psychology of music: how things work – left brain, right brain – and I suffer quite a lot from getting music on the brain. So much so that I can sit down and 'play' through a whole movement, but sometimes the brain plays tricks and I get the same phrase repeated. Sometimes it's so loud that I can't understand why other people can't hear what's going on in my head."

The plot of *Songspinnners* might even make a good plot for an opera. "That would be wonderful! If any composers out there would like to do it..." Perhaps she could do it herself. "I'm not sure. I had opera at the back of my mind. Something melodramatic. Opera is probably my favourite type of music. I like the blend of drama and music. But I've never been able to set my own words. I've always fancied, though, setting somebody else's." Anthony Burgess believed that the future of the novel depended on the eventual fusion of music and the literary form... "And he was a composer as well," says Sarah. "He was probably rather ahead of his time."

*Songspinnners* also examines the theme of artistic persecution and oppression. Now that we have established that the Rushdie Affair was not on her mind, what was? "I was going further back than Rushdie's problems, in *Songspinnners*. I was

looking at Stalinist Russia in particular. Inevitably I look in musical tropes. And also back to the beginning of the 19th century, in Belgium – where there was a riot that brought down the government. Giuseppe Verdi, too – his themes being sung when they shouldn't have been, and people being put up against the Austrian government. So those were the things I was thinking of...

"When I was in my teens and discovering the music of Shostakovich, I was appalled at what he'd had to go through. And some other Russian composers, too, had to alter their styles. And the effect this must have had on them! Not to mention the composers who went into the Nazi concentration camps and were part of the Stalinist purges. Shostakovich was never able to write in the same way again. I love the Fourth Symphony and I think that was the first one to be suppressed. Either you toed the party line or you were in deep trouble. Which he somehow managed to do, but I sometimes think: what an anguish it must have been to have these thoughts that he couldn't put down. He sometimes produced a piece that was ironic, and I would imagine that it was lost on the Communists. When the Shostakovich revival happened in the late 60s, there were still critics saying, 'This music is so buoyant' as if this were a terrible crime. And yes, it's true – but there's a terrible bitterness behind the buoyancy. You can hear it if you listen hard enough."

The main character in *Songspinnners* is Orial, a female amanuensis, employed by a composer whose hands are ruined in a fire, to write down the music he dictates. This had its basis in history. The composer "Delius had syphilis (I think) which caused him to go blind, but he still wanted to compose. A young Yorkshireman called Eric Fenby loved Delius's music and he presented himself to the composer, who was then quite old, and offered himself as his amanuensis. They had this very strange working relationship where Delius would *umm* and *aah* and they worked out this amazing shorthand. It's a story that has always haunted me. I thought, how difficult for Fenby to write it all down, and how difficult for Delius, in his own kind of prison, to put the idea across... I started off with a short-story idea about a composer who had a stroke, but I didn't go through with it. But it led to *Songspinnners* and the short story that was in *Interzone* ('Airs From a Different Planet')."

Orial's moral dilemma is to follow her artistic impulses or obey her father, who has forbidden his daughter any access to music because of the way his wife died as a result of music. Needless to say, Orial rebels. Sarah comments: "There are certain things

that I had great fun with with her, particularly in the setting. If anybody wants to look closely at where it's set, they'll see it's where I come from. I come from Bath, I'm a Bathonian, and when I was growing up – I'm living in exile – I would walk around imagining an alternate Bath. The insights I could bring to Orial are her desires to be a composer. I tried to put across the process of composition, which is something that other writers who are not composers do not always get right."

What is Sarah's working schedule like? She says, "I find I'm restricted by and large to my sons' term time. When they're in the house it's quite difficult to work because it's them and their friends. So I do have to be quite self-disciplined. I work in the mornings when I'm not at school, or in the afternoons when I'm not at school. If there's a major rush on I work any time that I can possibly get upstairs to the word-processor." Would she waste time if she had a whole day to write? "Quite possibly, yes."

Could she speak a little bit about the new novel? "It's called *The Lost Child* and it's set somewhere that

concile themselves with this problem. A young man named Rahab is an apprentice tailor. In the middle of the night he hears a noise and goes downstairs, and on his doorstep is a dead child. Everything unwinds from there."

So the theme of reconciliation is present in everything that Sarah has written so far? "It's something that has been in the back of my mind for some time," she explains. "All three books have religions in one way or another. It is something that bothers me about the present modern-day world. But this is the first time that I've put something from my own personal background in a fantasy context – which is to do with being part of a religion, and yet not part of it. Especially when you see the orthodox side of the religion behaving in a way that you find fundamentally alien. This kind of dichotomy is a troubling issue at the moment. Writing about it – I don't think I've found any answers, but..."

At least you understand the questions. "Exactly... My background is Jewish but I'm not practising. (I usually get speechless at this stage.) I feel that as I'm not living a Jewish life I'm not qualified to speak about Judaism, but the issues are still there – the issues of persecution, tolerance and the desire for tolerance. That must have informed my work at some level. But it wasn't consciously there. I read about a lot of mythologies, about what makes things tick. I looked at what Lai (in *Moths to a Flame*) had done and what would make him be able to live with himself afterwards. He has a great need to atone which drives him. In the first version of the book, Lai fell a lot further down in terms of addiction, and he had to crawl back up. But we modified that in the end."

Does she plan her work carefully, or prefer to freefall? "I used not to plan at all, and I think that was my error. I don't find planning easy but I couldn't do what I do now without planning. I'm not somebody who plans everything. I don't have a very detailed synopsis but I do nevertheless have a synopsis that I work to, by and large, with the odd deviation." It veers in another direction? "Sometimes it does, yes. Sometimes I have to say, 'Back!'" And how much preparation would she put into a novel? "Quite a lot," she replies. "I do quite a lot of background reading, which may sound odd for fantasy fiction." And reading in general? "I do read children's fiction to keep up with what there is. I like to read poetry, although I haven't read much recently. If you were to look at my bedside reading at the moment..." Eclectic? "Eclectic, absolutely. I allow myself to read novels in the summer holidays, but mostly during the year I read around whatever work-in-progress I have going on..."



could be Southern France. It would obviously be an alternate Southern France and it deals with the problems of what I call the Tsiyonim – a race who lost their city of Tsiyon several centuries earlier and are now doomed to wander the world and try to settle in somewhere. But they suffer persecution. They lost Tsiyon because they had an immediate connection with their deity, and due to some mistakes which were made at the time the connection was ... not exactly severed ... but altered. At the back of it, they are still trying to rec-

# NEWBOLD

AN EXTRACT FROM THE DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY SUPPLEMENT PUBLISHED 2034

*Uri Geller*

**NEWBOLD, Thomas MacIntosh** (1967-2024) Scientist and psychical researcher, was born at 2 Mull Terrace, Oban, Scotland, 11 September 1967, the only child of Ewart MacIntosh Newbold, a solicitor, and his wife Esther MacReady of Fort William. Ewart Newbold (1918-1999) of Oban married late in life, ending a bachelor existence which many acquaintances had assumed to be an immutable circumstance. Friends of his bride, a schoolteacher who at the age of 39 still lived with her parents, were no less surprised, but a still greater shock came a few months later when Esther (1927-1970) announced they were expecting a baby.

Always inclined to give thanks for his blessings, "Tom" Newbold sometimes remarked: "It really is quite *outrageous* that I ever did get born at all" – the way he rolled that "outrageous" around his mouth typifying the West Highlands drawl he retained all his life. His grandparents had shared his outrage: Ewart's parents were already dead by 1967 but Esther's mother and father refused to attend the Christening or even to see the child. Reluctant to part with their daughter, despite Ewart's good social standing and comfortable affluence, they were disgusted that a middle-aged pair of newlyweds should embark on child-rearing. Others, assuming it had been a love-match, were bewildered to see the unlikely bridegroom treating his wife, even before their baby was born, with brusque rudeness.

"The truth is," Newbold once confessed to an interviewer, "neither of my parents would have made a very satisfactory spouse to anyone. They both wanted a child, urgently, so they decided to be unsatisfactorily married. Naturally, it couldn't last." In fact, Newbold Senior wanted more than simply "a child": he wanted a son, a son whose character he could mould and whose education dictate. "What my father wanted, really, was to be reincarnated."

The Newbold marriage disintegrated. Esther, estranged from her family, severed from her job and living in a strange town, could not hope to withstand the withering disdain of a man who had all of Oban as his natural ally. Thomas being born, Esther was redundant, and she was made to know it. Thomas's earliest memory was of watching a woman, his mother, as she sat in the family car in the road outside their home, eating her dinner with a plate on her lap because Ewart had banished her from the house. "I cannot recall my mother ever dressed me or fed me or taught me. It was always my father."

Esther moved away in June 1970, and was killed in a car accident in Kings Lynn six weeks later. Her

absence made little impact on the Newbold home. Ewart, who had virtually withdrawn from legal practice two years earlier, was already deep into a teaching programme which would have daunted most bright ten-year-olds. Thomas was to learn German, French and Russian; he was to be able to read at three years, to know simple arithmetic at four, to begin on abstract mathematics at five. The child repaid constant attention and instruction with an earnest vigour which soon saw him overshooting targets – he read and memorized entire passages at a reading; he performed calculations in his head as quickly as they were spoken; he displayed an uncanny ability, which stayed with him all his life, to grasp both a mathematical law and its logical extensions before the latter had been explained. "Show me a rule of thumb," he said without boasting, "and I can see all the fingers too."

It quickly became plain to Ewart Newbold that his protégé was going to outshine him – was too brilliant, in fact, for a career in the law. The slow procession of legal niceties would suffocate him. The halls of academe were his natural abode – but under which roof? Ewart, who had studied law at Durham, was ascetic to the point of masochism, rising before dawn even on the longest days of summer and denying himself food unless he achieved daily objectives. Thomas accepted the regime. But even as a child, he possessed an aesthete's imagination. Reading voraciously, he discovered a love of stories, rooting them out of encyclopedias and history books when his father banned fiction from the home. He insisted on being taken to concerts, beginning a life-long passion for Beethoven at seven, and though he was never permitted to learn an instrument he always had perfect pitch, explaining that each note in an octave was as definite to him as each colour in a spectrum.

Add to these precocious abilities a talent for asking unanswerable questions, and it was clear by 1974, when Thomas sat his first General Certificate exams, that law was not the only subject too dry for his tinderbox mind. He might also burn out of control in chemistry or mathematics – though he excelled in these subjects, passing A-levels at Grade A aged nine. Before his tenth birthday, he had devoured all the private tutelage his father could provide. He became the youngest undergraduate ever at Oxford. The course was physics, the college Brasenose and the public interest phenomenal. The austere Newbolds became an overnight sensation, less celebrities than media freaks. They walked together, sat in lectures and tutorials together,

worked side by side and ate alone together. The father spoke of his son almost as a physical piece of himself, like a third arm: it was always, "We are studying, we are excelling."

Ewart attempted to fend off media interference but long absence from the wider world had dulled his judgement; remaining suspicious of the university establishment, which was keen to shield its pre-pubertal pupil, the father preferred to put his trust in journalists and fixers who invariably betrayed him. Thomas Newbold was never allowed to sink from view, for his father's unguarded comments and ill-advised interviews gave the press a steady diet of fresh information. By the time he achieved First Class Honours in 1979 everything in the twelve-year-old's life from breakfast cereals to bedtime routines had been divulged to reporters. The student himself, wise beyond his years, chose his public words carefully. But the strains in his relationship with his father were already becoming apparent. Newbold later identified his own longing for respect as crucial – respect as a student from his older peers and respect as an individual from his father. Most probably it was also at this time that he learned his grand secret – a secret which the world would discover only after his death.

In 1980 Thomas, barely a teenager, applied to have himself made a ward of court. The plan was his own – he would live on campus, with the support of tutors, while he studied for his doctorate and taught undergraduates. His father would be allowed access to him only under supervision and only when both the child and the tutors agreed. This was a hard blow to Ewart, and quite unexpected, but Thomas saw that a clean, ruthless break was the only chance to bypass the bitter squabbling which was already their main form of discourse. "Our relationship was poisoning itself. I had to bang open some doors and let the air clear."

Ewart Newbold returned to Oban and shut himself indoors. He had no phone, no television and took no newspapers. His curtains were always drawn. He paid his bills, took in his milk and once a month walked to the local stores to restock his cupboards; otherwise, the world had no sign that he was alive.

The prodigy thrived. Despite newspaper columnists' fears that he would spin into dissolution, in a whirlpool of parties and drugs and sex and sects, Newbold simply continued to apply his rapacious mind to physics. He was particularly drawn to the borderline with philosophy, where subatomic particles allowed time to split into simultaneous universes and extra dimensions lay curled up and unseen. The vigour of his studies allowed little space for loneliness, but he seemed easily to replace his father's companionship with casual friendships. An articulate but not yet mesmeric speaker, Newbold had an infinite capacity for listening, which guaranteed him a lifelong supply of staunchly loyal comrades. As a teenager he rarely opened up his own heart, or indeed showed that the emotional outpourings which he attentively endured from friends really touched him. "I stared at other people's feelings," he later said, "and wondered what on earth I felt myself."

A move to Stanford, CA, followed in 1988, where his work at the Linear Acceleration Center was combined

with a senior lecturing rôle at the University of California. Many predicted a Nobel Prize would drop into his lap for his particle annihilation research (it did not; Newbold did not win the prize until 2001 and then, uniquely, again in 2007). What no one expected was that his many-coloured electronic images of antiproton collisions with protons to create Newbold Stars would feature as posters on a million students' walls. Asked what fired his urge to experiment with the building blocks of matter, he answered: "Nothing is what it seems, nobody and nothing. I want to discover the secret biology of the universe."

A professorship in 1991 was accompanied by the physics chair at Hamburg, conveniently close to the Deutsches Elektronen Synchrotron accelerator (DESY). Newbold was the first Western nuclear scientist to inspect the work of the Institute for High Energy Physics in Beijing. In 1995 he returned to America, as Senior Principal Scientist at the Cornell Electron Storage Ring (CESR) at New York's Cornell University. At this stage he discovered an aptitude for speaking to camera and, accepting his celebrity for the first time, began appearing on television. "You've got to talk when a camera's around," he explained. "A camera never breaks the ice – it waits for you. Just sits there, waiting to hear something." The remark revealed as much about his approach to human contacts as televisual ones. But his modesty belied his real skill at taming complex subjects so viewers would not fear them. "Everyone's got a particle accelerator in their home," he famously told a press conference at CESR. "It's called a TV tube. All I do is play around with big televisions." He liked to remind colleagues that Sir William Crookes, who in 1879 began the study of glowing gases within electrically-charged glass tubes, was also a founder of the Society for Psychological Research.

There had been meetings with his father during the past decade, but never the hoped-for reunion. "He's still living in the past," Newbold confided to a friend at CESR. "I can't travel back in time to fetch him. Not even in a particle accelerator – not yet. He has to make his own way forwards to Now." A brush with death in 1997 gave urgency to his desire to repair the breach: Newbold was driving at around 110kph on the interstate south of New York when a beam of red light blinded him. He lost control of the car and struck the central reservation before bouncing back into the overtaking lane. By a miracle, the heavy traffic was able to steer round him as he pointed his car across four streams of vehicles and onto the embankment. The light had been fired from a hand-held laser, probably built into a keyring or a blackboard pointer and aimed from a bridge or a passing car. Newbold accepted it was a random attack; although newspaper reports hinted at criminal intent by jealous rivals or a celebrity stalker, the police were convinced he was the unlucky victim of a juvenile who'd discovered a new form of vandalism. He escaped injury, but for the rest of his life he was colour-blind.

Typically, Newbold turned his experience to the benefit of science. Dismantling a laser keyring to study its mechanics, he noticed two quartz crystals which focused the beam by vibrating minutely like motorized mirrors. He began to investigate the energy potential of crystals, theorizing they might serve to amplify or even harness

the forces unleashed when particles collided. He also became an enthusiast for the healing powers of crystals, a quirk which earned him much hard ribbing from colleagues. With his usual openness, he neither hid his belief in the mystical properties of crystals nor brooded on the mockery of other scientists.

He credited crystal power with healing the father/son bond. After weeks of intense meditation, which he described as “firing particles of love across the Atlantic from an accelerator crystal,” Professor Newbold received a summons from Oban, to a 70th birthday party. “It wasn’t the wildest party,” he recalled – “just me and my dad. Like the old days. But he’d acquired a stray cat, and that rather lightened up proceedings.”

The reunion was not fated to last. Within a year, Ewart Newbold was dead from prostate cancer, unaware until the last three weeks of his life there was anything wrong with him. Newbold had returned to New York after a week in Scotland and, although the possibility that his father might join him in America had been mentioned, they never saw each other again. Newbold said he was woken at 6:11 on January 4, 1999, by his father’s voice saying, “I’ve come to join you in your work, Thomas.” At this moment, 2,000 miles away on the north-west coast of the British Isles, Ewart Newbold was dying. Thomas later called this “the pivotal instant of my existence.”

The profound shock of a telepathic communication from his father’s spirit was amplified, during the months that followed, by repeated messages. Newbold’s first attempt to confide in a friend was brushed aside with embarrassment, and he quickly learned that death’s social taboo extended to every subject it touched, from grief to spiritualism. Initially, the scientist in Newbold explained the perception of his father’s voice in his ear as a delusion of grief, perhaps made all the stronger by the fact it was the only serious symptom of mourning he experienced. “I took my father’s death pretty well, on the whole,” he commented. “It seems he took it rather less well.” The voice commented on the people Newbold met, the methods of his work and, most forcefully, on his daily habits. A preference for Apple Macs over IBM-compatibles in the CESR press-room might exact no more than an aside from the disembodied mentor, but Newbold’s habit of listening to Beethoven or Brahms late in the evening while sipping an island malt could provoke a full-blown rant. Newbold rationalized he felt guilt at his father’s lonely death, a guilt which, in manifesting itself as aural hallucinations, enabled the grieving son to despise himself whenever he failed to maintain Ewart’s standards of austerity.

Gradually, the scientist Newbold was displaced by the philosopher Newbold. Could this actually be a case of haunting, even of possession? “One morning I turned the question around: was there any evidence to suggest this was not genuinely my father? And at that point I realized I had a working hypothesis, which I either could or could not disprove.” Whether or not Ewart Newbold was real, the son found he was no more able to live with his father than he had been at 13. Fearing the voice could drive him out of his wits if he continued to tolerate it by himself, Newbold took two steps: he consulted a medium and he moved into a large apart-

ment at Cornell with a pair of colleagues. The medium was Dr Alex Mornay; the colleagues were Jacob and Vanessa Kru-Starling.

Mornay’s practice, a sideline to her work as a hearing specialist at the university medical centre, was not conducted for profit but patients were expected to make a sizeable donation to charity before being considered for treatment. This donation, naturally, was non-returnable. Newbold, in paying \$5,000 to the Princess Diana Memorial Fund, was demonstrating considerable faith in his hypothesis that Ewart spoke to him from beyond the veil. His faith was rewarded, rapidly. At the first sitting Mornay, a materialization medium, became stricken by a trance almost as soon as Newbold entered her chambers. He noted she had no time to dim lights, attempt distractions or engage hidden machinery. He also noted that, standing on his left side and partly obscured by wall heater – as though standing actually in the wall – was his father. The body had a vaporous inconstancy but the eyes and mouth were vivid. The pupils fixed unblinkingly on Newbold, so that it took all his strength to return the gaze. The mouth was moving but, inexplicably, the voice did not come either from the wraith or directly within Newbold’s ear; instead, it was spoken by Dr Mornay, who had fallen back into a chair and was seized with rigid tremors which caused her legs and arms to extend and twitch. Confronted physically by his father, Newbold found himself better able to answer the voice, and a furious dialogue quickly developed which later he estimated had endured for an hour. When the spirit vanished, Dr Mornay was in a state of exhaustion and dehydration, and in fact passed that night under surveillance in hospital. The voice, however, did not obtrude again, which Newbold took to be the final proof of its reality.

“I had to convince my father he was truly dead. He did not know it. He was like a man dreaming, aware that nothing is real but unaware this state of affairs is not normal,” Newbold wrote in his autobiography, *Vital Signs* (2023). “My life was more like a nightmare to him, because he wanted to control it and he couldn’t. It had been that way ever since I graduated and our one meeting, just before he died, had not been enough to reconcile him to this unacceptable fact. So his spirit carried on, struggling with its errant son. And thanks to the generosity of Alex Mornay, who for short periods was able to allow spirits to subexist through her vital energy, my father and I had another meeting. This time, he faced some difficult truths. I think when he had made the immense mental leaps that permitted him to say, ‘I have passed over,’ the other facts followed meekly. He became reconciled. I look forward to meeting him, in the beyond, knowing our differences have been wiped away.”

Newbold the scientist, anxious not to be discarded, started to gain ground rapidly on Newbold the philosopher. A theory of materialization was propounded that would lay the groundwork for his momentous second Nobel Prize. The theory drew on two main sources: the experiences of Dr Mornay and the CESR research into crystals as amplifiers which was about to revolutionize particle physics.

Dr Mornay’s belief in the endocrine glands as points of intersection for a human being’s biological and astral

bodies was adopted by Newbold, though tempered by later discoveries. The glands, otherwise known as the seven chakras in Hinduism, occur at the crown of the head, the brow of the face, the throat, the heart, the solar plexus, the sacral (close to the sexual organs) and the base of the spine. According to Dr Mornay, a person's spirit saturated its body and flowed into the flesh-and-blood system through the glands. Misalignment occurred when trauma or depression displaced the astral form, usually to the right. To a psychic, Newbold's spirit could be seen quite luminously, projecting from his right side. Its colour was a faint, glassy blue, indicating the trauma was an old one, probably dating to puberty. The effect of this displacement was to leave Newbold's left side unoccupied, providing an easy platform to a spirit recently deprived of its own body yet unaware that it should be passing on to the next plane of life. The phenomenon of body displacement and spirit possession was fairly common in severely depressed patients or those suffering nervous breakdowns; the mental illness superseded the possession, which was then dismissed by rational doctors as a hallucinatory symptom of the sick mind.

The remedy for astral dissynchrony was meditation, a discipline which Newbold applied vigorously. His favourite technique, he enjoyed telling friends, was to count his thoughts: sitting upright on a comfortable chair, clasping a rock crystal between his fingertips, he would observe each thought as it entered his head, number it and dismiss it. "If you don't try to chase them, it's surprising how easily they slip off," he confided. "Embarrassment at their own banality, I shouldn't wonder." But what tickled him most was their infrequency – sometimes as few as three thoughts in the space of a minute. "Thank God for a decent education," he loved to say, "because it's plain there's nothing very brilliant about the grey matter itself."

The Nobel committee disagreed, and two years after his father's death it awarded him the Physics Prize for his extraordinary particle energizer – the Ewart Accelerator, named after the man who gave him his education. The accelerator's dramatic design, marrying 1950s comic-book science fiction to commonplace technology, captured the public imagination, with the result that subatomic physics became as popular as cosmology had been a decade earlier. Even Hollywood got in on the act, prompting Newbold to quip on a live prime-time chat-show: "That film gets the facts and the physics equally f-f-fuddled!" Countless newspaper graphics tackled the physics, showing a cutaway of a glass tube forming part of a ring 30 kilometres long. Below the ring at two points, as far distant as possible, were powerful electromagnets. An electric pulse generated a magnetic field and in doing so created an opposite electromagnetic zone around two pieces of quartz within the tube. The conflicting fields forced the objects apart; since the coils were fixed, the crystals were bound to float. This natural reaction, well known to science since the 19th century, had the bizarre appearance of a conjuring trick and contributed hugely to the public fascination with particle guns. A lateral magnetic field, applied inconsistently, caused the crystals to spin in the almost frictionless vacuum. Any nuclear particle discharged between those rapidly rotating chips of quartz was sub-

ject to an overwhelming energy increase.

Particle physics defines subatomic masses in terms of potential energy, which increases in relation to velocity. An electron gains energy to the value of one electron volt (eV) when it accelerates through an electric potential of a single volt. Thousands of electron volts (KeV), or millions (MeV), or thousands of millions (GeV), or millions of millions (TeV) are the usual gauges. When we consider an electron's mass (where, in the equation  $e=mc^2$ , the velocity of light is equal to 1) can be expressed as 0.51MeV and the average human's mass as  $4 \times 10^{31}$ , we begin to appreciate Einstein's remark that detecting particles is like "shooting sparrows in the dark."

Before the Ewart Accelerator, the greatest energy potentials achieved were around 20 TeV. The new technology multiplied that ten-fold. For the first time, the physicists at CESR were able to smash protons and anti-protons together so hard that the quarks and leptons flung out in the explosion unravelled themselves. The hidden dimensions, prefigured by mathematical theory for nearly 20 years but never observed, radiated measurable effects. Seven additional dimensions of space and a second dimension of time – Newbold's Hypertime – became observable. Every kind of thinking about the universe was revolutionized.

Newbold had continued to live with the Kru-Starlings, partly because the arrangement afforded them the luxury of discussing confidentially the momentous CESR experiments. Media reports inevitably put an ugly interpretation on the relationship, prompting an angry letter to the *New York Times* in February 2003, signed by all three, denying a *ménage à trois*. There was another consideration for Newbold: Vanessa Kru-Starling exhibited sporadic mental disorders which he believed were rooted in spirit possession. A violent upheaval from her family, followed by miscarriages and compounded by an often stormy marriage to the wilfully extroverted Jacob Kru, had deeply unsettled her psyche. Short incidents of insanity, sometimes benign, sometimes not, had begun to occur regularly. By teaching her to meditate, Newbold hoped to realign her astral body. Crystals naturally played a part, and on March 31, 2003, he assembled the skeleton of a Ewart Accelerator in the sitting-room of their apartment. While he was calibrating the lateral spin, Vanessa Kru-Starling suffered an epileptic fit from which she emerged, as had happened before, with a different personality, speaking in a rapid, grating voice and an unknown language. The fit was likely to pass quickly, but Jacob Kru-Starling recognized the condition as one in which his wife had previously attempted to injure herself. Seeing large crystals in her fists and fearing she might use them as weapons against herself, he seized her wrists. A struggle ensued, with Vanessa using almost demonic strength to force her husband to the floor. Newbold, chronically ill-suited to any physical intervention, began talking urgently but calmly to the personality occupying Vanessa's body, and was suddenly startled to be answered from the other side of the room. A hunched figure, glaring furiously from under a green felt hat, crouched beside a book-case.

Glancing back at Vanessa, Newbold saw she was unconscious. Her body lay in a direct line from the creature, through the Accelerator. The spinning quartz, he

instantly theorized, had projected the spirit out of Vanessa, drawing no more energy than she usually spent in harbouring it but amplifying the force, so greatly that a material body was formed.

The theory proved true. Catching a single strand of spirit energy between the whirling crystals, his device had unravelled the parasite body from Vanessa just as a loop of wool can unthread a jumper – and then energized it to the point where it became self-supporting. Questioning the weird creature in the Kru-Starling's apartment availed little, though a tape-recording of the end of the incident, made by Jacob, suggests the sprite was speaking an antique form of Gaelic. How it had chosen Vanessa was never known, but it was woken up, or frightened, enough not to return when the Accelerator was powered down. Without fully grasping the enormity of what he had created, Newbold spent the rest of the night completing Vanessa's cure. The experiment had served to confirm his belief in spirit possession and the afterlife, and he did not think at first of the impact it would have on a sceptical world. Instead, he focused on the other personalities revealed by Vanessa during her fits and, using meditation and hypnosis, coaxed out each of them. The Accelerator projected six more spirits from her body; two appeared malevolent, one was dangerously confused and three were benign – one being the spirit of her grandmother, who claimed she had protected Vanessa against the other occupiers and who was glad to return to the spirit world now her job was done.

Science was blown apart. For the first time, here was an experiment which could be conducted in a laboratory, by any trained operator, with any number of observers using any manner of recording equipment. Even individual experiments could be repeated, since a spirit once drawn out could often be persuaded back into the host human. While atheists and opponents of psychic research bayed impotently, a plethora of related experiments began, until it seemed every psychological institute in every city around the world was conducting spirit investigations with Ewart Spirit Accelerators (ESA). Practised mediums were eager to join the tests, entering trance states to invite personalities from the past into their bodies and then allowing the visitors to be materialized through the crystals. Many spirits, initially bewildered to find themselves earthbound and corporeal, reacted with delight to the experiments, answering questions and discoursing on the afterlife with the intelligence, wit or wisdom which had been their characteristic while alive.

Four days after the Kru-Starling revelation, an ESA materialized Albert Einstein in a Zurich laboratory who proceeded to talk with gusto about relativity in the next world. Such undreamed-of conversations became the sole pursuit of television stations, whose bosses were quickly disappointed to find that spirits could not be commanded to appear on their shows and were indifferent to any cash offers. Still, thousands of personalities, particularly those who had not been long dead or who had died unexpectedly and were still coming through the trauma of their own demise, were compliant. Monroe discussed her own death calmly during a materialization staged at the White House; a painfully sad John Lennon appeared on British television;

Gandhi spoke to worshipping millions in India, and offered to broker a lasting Middle East peace; Churchill confronted Hitler at a psychic conference in Moscow; Oscar Wilde, in three sittings, dictated a novel which had haunted him for a century; Dickens embarked on a speaking tour of America, declaring he was delighted to shake off the dullness of eternity; Evita returned constantly to the Argentine, where fresh miracles were wrought every day in her image; Nixon, burdened by lies, went on NBC to confess; JFK fingered his killers; John Wayne declared he would run for president (but was rapidly outgunned by the senate, who passed a law forbidding dead people to run for office).

Thomas Newbold, who overturned the weight of sceptical prejudice with a single experiment, was honoured by every nation, in every way imaginable, and at the same time attempted to shrink from public life. His great concern was physics, and he spent the rest of his life attempting to demonstrate how the afterlife could exist within the hidden dimensions revealed by his particle collisions. His theories were often convincing, but never proven – a task which, he accepted in his final years on earth, would be completed by younger scientists. Or perhaps, if permanent stabilizers could be developed for the ESA, by older ones. Even by Newbold himself.

Thomas Newbold was dark-haired and darker-eyed, with his mother's light skin and his father's strong bones. His ranging physique and delicate movements gave him a physical beauty of which he was patently unaware. He had many true friends but professed on several occasions that he had never had a sexual experience and never expected to. Despite this, he married Vanessa Starling in 2016, more than a decade after the collapse of her marriage to Jacob Kru. The union was short-lived, dissolved by mutual agreement eight months later. In 2021 Newbold was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer and given six weeks to live. His regimen of meditation plus Beethoven with whisky prolonged this to three years. Refusing to be nursed, even during the final weeks, he said he looked forward to dying, so he could meet Beethoven, who was steadfastly deaf to summonses by mediums. During the last months he was comforted by a series of meetings, through the ESA, with both his mother and his father.

The greatest mystery of his life was uncovered only at his autopsy. Having left his body to medical science, he must have been certain of this ultimate revelation – that Thomas Newbold was in fact a woman.

(Sources: Thomas Newbold, *Vital Signs*, pub. Headline 2024; *Newbold: A Life Extraordinary*, by Levi Schultz, pub. Penguin 2026; dispatches in *The Times* and others, April 2024; private information; personal knowledge, including interviews with Newbold via ESA, 2029-2033.)

**URI GELLER**  
Published 2034.

**Uri Geller** became world-famous in the 1970s as a psychic and a TV personality. His first novel, *Shawn*, was published in 1990, and his second, *Ella* (the story of a teenager who discovers she has paranormal powers), is due out in March 1998 from Headline. Israeli-born, he lives in Berkshire.

# MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe

The extraordinary thing about *Starship Troopers* is that it understands exactly how pivotal Heinlein's barmy novel is to the history of sf, and how much baggage needs to be calculated for in plotting lift-off. It's not simply that Heinlein's 1959 novel was the signal that first alerted the world to the disquieting possibility that the most influential figure in sf was completely off his trolley. By 1959 it was too late for second thoughts: Heinlein's children, the generation raised on his masterly magazine work and juveniles, were growing up, and the future history of American sf was already written. Feelgood libertarianism had inherited the stars; early left-leaners like Pohl and Asimov had by now converted, and by the time the flecks of foam around the master's mouth grew impossible to ignore, the 1960s had arrived to find the future already colonized by naval-academy cadet types with a half-read copy of *Atlas Shrugged* poking out of their kitbags. And *Starship Troopers* was the novel that first laid bare the political undertext to what had already become the standard image of the interplanetary future, with its weird fantasy of minimal states with enormous federal navies. What's more, it did it without a trace of irony, and targeted itself at a male young-adult readership who scarcely noticed – I certainly didn't – that there was anything a bit bonkers about the slabs of didactic holding apart the three (out of 14) chapters of action.

The man behind the miracle that anything as thoughtful, funny, and sophisticated as *Starship Troopers* should have been made from *Starship Troopers* is the project's largely-unsung originator, Ed Neumeier: one of the very few well-paid writers in Hollywood with a genuine respect for pre-cinematic sf and a sense for what makes it dangerous. Neumeier it was who, after co-writing the film that turned a middle-aged Dutch art-house *auteur* with one Hollywood flop to his name into the most exciting figure to hit sf cinema since Jim Cameron, confessed in after years to creating *RoboCop* in the first place because what he really wanted to write was *Judge Dredd*, except that he couldn't get at the rights. And though nobody on earth but Paul Verhoeven could have kept Neumeier's astonishing script for *Troopers* intact to screen, I doubt whether Verhoeven has actually opened the book, let alone understood its monumental significance for the genre. The most provocative moment in *Starship Troopers* isn't the heavy-handed spectacle when Col. Doogie Howser re-emerges from his plot cupboard in SS greatcoat – a gesture of unease from Verhoeven, I suspect, lest the ever-subtler ideological ironies of Neumeier's script





are by this point getting lost on matinee audiences in Tallahassee. As the sole contemporary A-list Hollywood director to have actually experienced Nazi occupation, he's more than entitled. But far more subversive is the final propaganda shot of Heinlein's Carmen in full Captain's regalia on the bridge of her own starship, in a pose we've seen in half a thousand *Star Trek* segments. You may claim, say the unseen subtitles, that Roddenberry's future is an inspirational triumph of liberal vision, but peel away the transhumanist slogans and you'll find the same slyly-sexualized Riefenstahlian fetish for uniforms, authority, and good old service discipline.

Despite such mischief, I actually doubt Heinlein's headstone is twitching with outrage at the film's comparatively venal narrative and ideological infidelities, because one of the first surprises about *Starship Troopers* is that it is, mutanda mutated, essentially *Starship Troopers*. A lesser screenwriter would have flicked with a sigh through the novel, highlighted the three or so cinematic pages, and thrown the rest away and wiped hands on a towel before opening a new untitled document and simply knocking out *Independence Day* with bugs. Neumeier has not only tried to do something with all the dreary bits of the narrative – the cadet camp, the huge cast of forgettable minor characters, the dated and embarrassing buddy-bonding – but has clung on to, and discreetly improved, all kinds of things from the book that you

wouldn't have thought worth bothering with at all, like Buenos Aires, or the whole structure of prologue-flash-back-catchup-climax.

Most of all, though, he's made the book's explicit political pokes in the chest central to the scenario. Heinlein's impish central notion was that citizen franchise should be restricted

## Starship Troopers:

*Previous page*, Casper Van Dien as Johnny Rico, the eponymous trooper; *above*, in orbit above Tango Urilla; *below*, director Paul Verhoeven; *opposite above*, Dina Meyer as Dizzy Flores; and *opposite below*, Sergeant Zim (Clancy Brown) binds Rico in preparation for his flogging.



to military veterans on the grounds that "a soldier accepts personal responsibility for the safety of the body politic of which he is a member, defending it, if need be, with his life. A civilian does not." Neumeier has not only worked hard to turn this line into something deliverable by a human actor, but makes it the climax of Rico's progress: "A citizen has the courage to make the safety of the human race their personal responsibility!" Sadly, even Neumeier pulls up short of doing anything with the novel's starkest idea, Heinlein's insistence that History and Moral Philosophy (sic) is an exact science capable of formal mathematical verification ("Are a thousand unreleased prisoners sufficient reason to start or resume a war?... Bring to class tomorrow a written proof, in symbolic logic, of your answer"), and that if you do the game-theoretical sums you come to the formal mathematical certainty that there is one true civics and Robert Heinlein is its prophet. Some things, presumably, are just beyond parody.

Still, the other key thing that Neumeier has recognized and embraced is sf's inheritance of the mantle of the gung-ho genocidal war movie. Only in sf can the good guys still say "One day, someone like me is going to kill you and your whole fucking race!" The big difference between 1959 and now is that the millennial West has finally created itself a world without war: not, unfortunately, in the sense that there's any less war in the world, but in the sense that citi-

zens of the filmgoing nations are absolved of any contact with or sense of responsibility for it. Mass killing has become a regrettable but distant quirk of developing nations who haven't had the foresight to be central to NATO interests; it's politically impossible in the Western democracies to declare war if there's any actual risk of home-team casualties, which is why we take such pains to ensure that none of the people we'd want to kick round the head has the ordnance to do us any damage back. But the result is that the experience of a nation at war is nowadays slightly less real for most filmgoers than alien abduction, dinosaur safaris, and schooldays in Beverly Hills. To address the unsayable things about war – the politics, the mob psychology, the ease with which genocide can be made to seem a moral act – you need to make one up.

In its way and its day, the novel already understood this. Heinlein's own *Troopers* was a massive exercise in nostalgic wish-fulfilment, recreating a never-was military past in a never-could-be future. Purist fans of the novel (if there are any still loose in the community) are bound to regret the loss of the cybernetic suits, Heinlein's inspired but frankly desperate device to explain why infantry warfare would make any sense on a galactic scale. By strapping his MIs into one-man humanoid tanks that respond to and amplify the soldier's body movements, Heinlein was able to imagine a contrived kind of retro future warfare in which the individual infantryman, and the values that went with him, could recover military significance in the nuke-toting world that already in the 1950s was making him an anachronism. Given the difficulties of telling the characters apart even with their cycle helmets on, you can see why the suits got

ditched in the movie; but it remains a flaw of the film that its drops now make no conceivable military sense.

Still, this is compensated by the clever things done with Heinlein's bugs, which Neumeier has enhanced with an honest-to-Smith real sf idea: a species that wages galactic imperialism without any technology whatever. The particle-beam bugs and escape-velocity asteroid warfare ("They can colonize planets by hurling their spore into space!") may be a sliver far-fetched, but they firm up Heinlein's own differentiation between us with a capital US and them with a capital *Them!* In the far corner, we have mindless, cultureless socialist insects whose only drive is to colonize the universe with their hideous spawn, while in our corner we have the rugged individualism and free will of, er, the Federal navy.

Best of all, though, *Starship Troopers* is centred, like the novel, on the barely-disguised projection of Heinlein himself. The most glorious thing in the film, as for that matter in all his other films, is Michael Ironside, and especially his stupendous first scene: a brilliant distillation into a 30-second monologue of the novel's entire bananas political polemic, much of it cut and pasted from Heinlein's own words. If you've stayed up the previous night plodding dutifully through the novel's interminable didactic rants, it's a giddy initiation to have the whole lot fired at you in a single Uzi barrage before the film's even got started. Neumeier, of course, has doubled the value by the inspired merger of Rico's adored Lieut. Racsak with the originally-separate character of Jean DuBois, the nutty high-school teacher whose authorial tirades are regurgitated in the novel via great wedges of clumsy flashback whenever no other voice is available. And not only is a crazed Heinlein



mouthpiece the character Ironside was put on this earth to play, but he gets to do it under the director who understands better than anyone else why Ironside is a star in a firmament all to himself, and with dialogue by the one writer in Hollywood who understands why this stuff is so funny and scary to need sending for Ironside in the first place. Just to hear this man deliver the line "They sucked his brains out!" is worth sneaking back in through the fire doors to see again.

Obviously it's a joy to see, in Verhoeven's return to the genre, one of the top three sf film-makers on earth reverting to what he does best, and the one thing he reliably does well – fast, funny future savagery with a tasty edge of deadpan black irony and an arsenal of mass deconstruction. But in a way Verhoeven's success in sf is a poignant symptom of his discomfort, post-*Showgirls*, with the other kinds of film-making available to someone of the frankly much wider range proven in his earlier Dutch films. By comparison with other European directors who've gone west, Verhoeven came to Hollywood late, reluctantly, and by wary degrees, and admits he went into sf because he didn't feel culturally equipped to do real contemporary America. In doing so, he blazed a career trail later travelled by the likes of Roland Emmerich, Luc Besson, and now Jean-Pierre Jeunet. There's no doubt that this injection of continental talent has fabulously invigorated the genre; but there's a



**interzone**

# Tube Corn



Wendy Bradley

Space is interesting but expensive: maybe those of us who are fans should start a campaign to get the Lottery to fund a British contribution to the space effort. Get those e-mails off to your MPs today. After all, the millennium is only a couple of years away so there will soon be a whole chunk of money (that portion of the "good causes" Lottery money currently being spent by the Millennium Commission), presumably going spare. In fact, when the "Millennium Commission" is time-expired would be the perfect date to set up a space investment fund, maybe calling it the "2001 Fund" in timely honour of Sir Arthur.

*2001* – the movie, that is – came very much to mind as I sat down to watch the preview tapes of *Space Island One* (Sky One, Wednesdays: sorry, satellite- and cable-free households, but I bet you know someone who'll tape it for you). The opening shot of the very first episode is, indeed, of a man walking towards us upside down, on the ceiling of a space-station corridor – until, that is, he reaches the camera and it is apparent this is just a fancy camera-angle as it swings overhead to follow him walking, prosaically, the right way up as he goes away from us – shades of the immortal movie, quickly pissed away in fancy camera-work.

*Space Island One* is a European co-production – English dialogue spoken in lots of interesting *mittel-European*

accents but, for once, no focal Yankee hero for the export market. It is set on a commercial space station, in Earth orbit in the year 2005, and the company which owns the station appears to be a European co-production itself, the global politics sketchy but apparently peaceful. The programme's selling points were supposed to include some actual NASA space footage but the three episodes I saw (one, two and, for some reason, five) might as well have been filmed in the traditional BBC gravel-pit against a backdrop of Lego and matte painting. Sorry guys, but you know how it is. Even the real thing doesn't cut it sometimes – after you've seen a million giant bugs and starship troopers re-enacting *Zulu* in CGI, a merely authentic shot of the planet from space looks, well, ordinary.

But this is mere detail: the real question is: is the programme any good? Well, yes, I have to say I think it is. I have some reservations, indeed some quite strong reservations, but equally I can see that I could very easily become completely hooked and finally have to make the commitment to get cabled up. What we have always needed is a naturalistic space opera, which treats space as a workplace, not a theatre of fantasy – no alien foreheads; no wormhole drives and jumps to light-speed; no Greys, Bugs, or MIBs; no dimension slides, time-slips or alternate universes.

And this is what we get: just a bunch of scientists sitting out there, doing real work and making a real difference, in a place where (some of us) have always wanted to be.

The main weakness however is plot resolution: you gallop through 30 minutes of soap in space, with realism and grit, and just as you get to the point where you care what happens next they go for the "aw, forget it, I can't think of a resolution" solution. This happened in each of the episodes I saw: we began with the space station booby-trapped by a former employee and had characters in peril but with little sense of the shape of the station to enable us to judge why they were in so much peril from being trapped in an airlock or how realistic the "we'll take them down here, and then through this bulkhead" solution would be. The plot resolution: he might have left other booby traps but we won't worry about them – left me boggling but, just about, willing to go for it.

But even when the plots are resolved I'm not sure I believe them. In the second episode the plot hinged on journalistic ethics: should we cover up the story of the possible rescue of two survivors of a crashed three-person space shuttle because we don't know exactly what happened? The idea that we should is crap: or at least unpersuasive. Any journalist would have published and been damned, and rightly so, surely. Not that I disagreed with their take

on the moral dilemma, more that I simply, honestly, could not see any moral dilemma. Publishing the story would not have endangered the rescue; the families of the survivors and the non-survivors would, surely, have had both a desire and a right to know the truth; and the flight's true commercial purpose had been concealed when it was arguably against the public interest for it to be so. But maybe it's me: I couldn't see a moral dilemma at the end of *Se7en* either: I just wanted Brad Pitt to blow Kevin Spacey away.

The fifth episode looked like a plot about academic trouble-making and old failures stealing the ideas of young mavericks: and then we suddenly seemed to run out of time, energy and plot so the old failure put on a headband and started rampaging round trying to trash the place. Maybe somebody cut a couple of motivational pages from the script in the translation and production process.

The thing about *Space Island One* is that its screen gives off too many false echoes of other space programmes. Why, for example, is it called *Space Island One* – why do we need the number in there? It's supposed to be set in the year 2005, which (I have to point out) is only seven years from now. Do we really believe there will be enough operational space stations up there in seven years' time that we have to number them? Shades of *Babylon 5* and *Deep Space 9*: why not just call it *Space Island*?

Overall it's a good idea, but its reach exceeds its grasp. We began the series with lots of people addressing "Harry" by name: well, by the



time we got to the taking-off-of-the-helmet and hair-shaking that revealed that Harry is a girl I think we would have had to be blind and deaf not to have got it: maybe she could have had a neon "ware girly" sign over her head but I can't think of any other indicator they forgot. And I do like the way the fags and booze signal she's the Bad Girl, even if that meant it was obvious from day one she'd have to be punished by the great and sexist gods of plot-development with an unwanted pregnancy.

Apart from Harry, the women in the traditional seven-person crew include the captain, Kathryn McTier, who is played by Judy Loe as a sensible woman manager and has managed not to set my teeth on edge even once so far. Her deputy, Walter B. Shannon, is the middle-aged plain-speaking bloke who used to be

in NASA: ah, the token Yank at last. Lyle Campbell, the Scottish science officer, eccentric genius and all-round nice guy, is the character who would have been played by Ted Raimi if this had been an American series. Dusan Kashkavian is the Cute Bloke (you tell by looking for which one takes his shirt off first: episode two in his case; he was also the upside down guy in the opening shot). The Cute Girl (took her top off in the *first* episode) is Paula Hernandez and she also seems to fulfil the function of the Jake Sisko/innocent young thing we can infodump vital statistics onto for the benefit of the viewer. But then they had to spoil it by introducing Alexi the boy genius in the fifth episode: why are the Wesley Crushers always boys? What do girl geniuses do? The 14-year-old computer wizard has become a cliché, to be avoided. Oh, and I mustn't forget Kaveh, the doctor, although in the three episodes I saw I might as well have done for all the lines he had.

On the whole I like the programme, what I've seen of it, but the trouble is I don't think it will take off. It's an extremely minority taste, a realistic/naturalistic space opera, broadcast on a satellite channel with a almost negligible reach in the first place: not many people will have the opportunity to see it and those who will enjoy it will only be a small subset of those who can get it. And, once the audience figures start to look feeble, will they have the guts to stick with it? Or will it turn into another *seaQuest* and go the "mad gods/killer plants/wacky aliens" route? Let's hope there's some backbone in Sky central, and that we all get the chance to see *Space Island One* on terrestrial reruns. Eventually. 2005 maybe?

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Above: *Space Island One* – Julia Bremerman (left) and Indra Ove.  
Below: *Space Island One* – The cast.



# A The hhhh

*Frank Cottrell Boyce*

There are a dozen priests at the altar but the priest in the middle is Father Gerry. All is still. It's midnight, on Christmas Eve, in the Church of the Manger in Bethlehem, just coming up to the Elevation of the Host. The sanctuary bell rings. "Hoc Est Corpus." A meditative silence flowers. This is it. The most pregnant moment of the most pregnant mass on the most pregnant feast in the most pregnant church in Christendom. If you don't taste the Real Presence now, you'll never taste it. Father Gerry listens to his heart and finds that it is humming, "No, you'll never put the ahhhhh in gravy without Bisto."

After Mass he talks to Father Damian. They are leading their Archdiocesan pilgrimage together. They have been inseparable since seminary. "Dame, did you get anything?"

"Socks. Lynx. Soap. A prayer book – like I might not have one."

"I mean, during the Mass, did you... you know, feel it?"

"What?"

"The Presence."

"What presence? I never felt any presence."

On New Year's Eve, Gerry slipped out of the Archdiocesan finger buffet at the Hotel Jolly Jerusalem and walked alone to Gethsemane. Surely there, where Christ Himself had wept, he would receive some reassurance. He knelt where he could see the stars. He tried to imagine the Bethlehem star. Would it have been visible in daylight? It would have been so easy then, to look up and see million tons of evidence in the sky. Please God let there be some presence in the Universe other than my own bloody consciousness. He began his long vigil.

It had verses, that Bisto advert. One verse about each member of the family. He was trying to recall the one about Dad. What did Dads do? Gerry's own Father had died in a car crash when he was eight. When it comes to gravy, what can beat...

Something was moving behind him. Other pilgrims? Bandits? Terrorists even? He swung round. There was a gentle glow in the olive branches, as though a luminous rosary had been left hanging there. The glow moved. "Who's that? Who's there?" A sing-song, fluting voice replied, "Pax Vobiscum..." and then they came.

They were slender and frail. Their eyes had that look of abstracted intensity you get if you have been driving too long. Their skin was pale. They wore long white

floaty robes and little, tinselly haloes hovered over their heads. Angels. Had his prayer been answered?

Not exactly. Not angels, but aliens. When you looked closely you could see that, though dressed the same, they were of many different species. They had come from every quadrant of the Galaxy. They all spoke perfect Church Latin. "What do you want?" asked Father Gerry.

"Well... to start with, Confession and Communion," said the one at the front. "My spiritual director died on the journey. Haven't had the sacraments since." They were all Catholic.

Obviously this was very exciting but Gerry couldn't help being slightly disappointed. Of course they could be the answer to his prayer in a roundabout way. Just not angels, that's all.

There was a good deal of interest in the press and in the streets. But the Church is good at discretion and the alien Catholics were soon safely behind the Vatican wall. Gerry and Damian went with them. The alien Catholics had asked for Gerry to lead their "pilgrimage."

In the Vatican, they were questioned closely by the Pope Himself. Gerry and Damian were thrilled to meet him on such terms. Damian had seen him at a public audience once and Gerry had seen him as a boy, the time he came to Manchester. Of course that was a different Pope. For both of them, meeting His Holiness face to face was just as unexpected as meeting the alien Catholics.

"How did you get here?" asked the Pope.

"Via Frankfurt," said Damian, eager to talk.

"I was talking to our New Brothers and Sisters," said the Pope. New Brothers and Sisters was now the official nomenclature. Gerry winced whenever he heard it. His own brother had died in the car with his Father.

"Sorry."

"In flying saucers," said the New Brothers and Sisters.

"But... how? Did you travel faster than light? What kind of engine? What fuel source?" asked the Pope, who had once been an engineer.

"Faith is our fuel source," said New Brother Number One. "The Power of Faith. We just pray about it and the flying saucers go." The New Brothers and Sisters were very big on Faith.

His Holiness was clearly impressed. "And the Good News, how did you come to hear it?"

"You surely remember," said Brother Number One,

"That both our Blessed Lord and His Holy Mother ascended into Heaven. Well, they stopped off on the way, at our planet and lots more. They're still doing it as far as I know."

They talked long into the night. The Pope asked our New Brothers and Sisters what they wanted. They told him they wanted him to anoint one of their number a Bishop so that their Bishops too could claim direct lineal descent from Saint Peter. The Pope was pleased to do it. He said to Father Gerry, "Who would have thought? Did you ever imagine?"

"Never in a month of Sundays," said Gerry. This was a good enough reply. It's also a line from the Bisto advert, which began to run through his mind as soon as the Pope and the aliens started going on about the role of the Oil of Chrism in Ecclesiastical History.

Later Gerry and Damian showed the New Brothers and Sisters round St Peter's. One of them stopped in front of the Pieta and said, "Now that is one chuffing amazing likeness." Damian had been giving them English lessons. On questioning it turned out that the Immaculate Heart and the Immaculate Conception had turned up on this New Brother's planet after the invention of photography. He had snapshots of both of them. He showed them to Gerry and Damian. Our Lord and Our Lady were standing one on each side of the alien, with their arms round him, leaning into the middle of the picture, grinning.

"Queued for two days to get that took," he said. "Look, they've written on the back." On the back it said, "To Cosmos from Jesus and Mary." Jesus and Mary both looked pretty much the same as they did in the Pieta. But less stressed.

The snaps were published in the papers. There was a great upsurge of piety throughout the world. The New Brothers and Sisters provided reassurance, excitement and inspiration. Their Faith-Powered Space ships became places of pilgrimage. People would test their own faith by trying to make them work. As time went by, more and more succeeded. Father Gerry, however, never put his faith to such a test.

When the Pope died, Father Gerry's close association with the New Brothers and Sisters was enough to get him elected to the Holy See. He took the name Thomas. He made Cosmos a Cardinal. Damian – now in charge of Vatican finances – restored the Holy See to wealth by making a series of lucrative franchising deals with car manufacturers. The Ford Franciscan became the most popular car on the planet. Its specialized engine meant that it ran on a phased combination of Faith and petrol. Very few people had enough Faith to fuel an effective ignition system, but almost everyone had enough for motorway cruising.

Everyone in the world felt good. Earth was suddenly the centre of the Universe again. And the new Pope Thomas was the centre of the Earth. But the terrible truth was that Thomas still didn't *feel* that much. Inside. He looked up at the stars and knew now that they were full of Catholics but... bulk was not the answer. Whenever it was quiet, his mind still silted up with old jingles.

In particular, he found Cosmos's enthusiasm embar-

assing. One afternoon, they were in the Sistine and Cosmos started to complain about the frescoes, "They've got nothing to do with religion. They're all about the cult of the artist. It's just Michelangelo showing off. Really speaking, they're idolatrous."

"I thought you liked the Pieta."

"Yeah, I like the early stuff but this is really over the top and self-important. You should paint over it."

"You can't paint over the Sistine Chapel!"

"Why not? You're the Pope."

"It's been there the best part of a thousand years."

"So Heritage is more important than the living well of Faith."

The Living Well of Faith, I ask you.

"Want to know what I think about this stuff? I think all that post-Vasari artist voodoo has blinded everyone. It's created a situation where you are content to allow this chapel – the panting heart of our Universal Faith – to be used as an exhibition hall for the celebration of homosexuality."

"What are you on about?!"

"Look. Look around you. Adam looks like one of the chuffing Village People. I'm telling you, a bucket of whitewash is the best thing for it."

There was no point arguing. Tom whitewashed the Sistine Chapel. Today, said the editorial in *Osservatore Romani*, the Holy Father has cut the chains of History. Thomas was hoping that someone would object but no bugger did. He looked up at the whitewashed walls and tried to imagine the muscular bodies beneath. All he could see was whitewash, though he knew intellectually that the bodies were there. This seemed to him to sum up his spiritual life.

He tried to talk it over with Damian, who was his confessor now for reasons of security. "I don't feel anything inside," he said. "I can see that things are going well but inside... nothing. Even my memory... it's clogged with crap. I can't remember the words to the Hail Holy Queen but I can do the whole of the Bisto song and the theme to *The Flashing Blade*."

"Oh, that was a great show," said Damian. "Who could forget that?" and he started to sing it. "You've got to fight for what you want, for all that you believe..."

Thomas joined in, in the heat of the moment. They bounced up and down on their seats, riding imaginary horses, like the two musketeers in the title sequence. Afterwards, Damian gave him Absolution and an Apple Newton in Papal white. "You said your memory was going. This is the ultimate information sculptor," he said. "It's got a 500-year diary so you can leave little messages for the next 20 popes. It's also – you'll love this – got an electronic Lectionary. No more pissing about with bookmarks. You switch it on and all the readings for the day are there. It even gives you key words for your sermon."

That evening at Mass, he saw the camera closing in on the Newton and realized that it was another of Damian's product placements.

He said the words of the Offertory, "O Lord we offer you this day this Warburton's bread and this Gallo Brothers' wine..."

The next thing that happened, of course, was the total collapse of world banking. Every account was

wiped clean. Not that the money vanished. There were still tills full of cash and vaults full of gold but no one knew whose it was. All the data had gone. There was chaos and fighting, but above all there was praying. Praying like Heaven never heard before (maybe during the Black Death or something).

Tom knew that it must be something to do with Cosmos. Cosmos was only too chuffed to take the blame. "Yes, I looked into cyberspace and saw that it was a mess. So I introduced this virus. It rearranged the whole thing along the lines suggested by Thomas Aquinas. Pornography and money are both under Mammon, for instance."

"How did you design a virus? You don't know the first thing about computers."

"I just said a little prayer and it all seemed quite simple."

Tom could see that this was a miracle. That this must mean the virus was the will of God. But it was intensely irritating just the same.

The Vatican accountants set about trying to redistribute the wealth but by then it was too late. Factory workers had tasted the sunlight and were not going back to the dark. Stressed-out executives were feeding their families with vegetables from their gardens. With no cars and no television, communities were being reborn. The make-do-and-mend skills that the homeless millions had acquired were suddenly at a premium. The homeless millions became mediant consultants. Pollution stopped. Nation states dissolved.

Damian said to Tom, "We're the only coherent authority left. We could clean up. We'll start by buying up the airlines."

"What for?"

"Well, we'll be able to move around the world. We can hold it all together."

"But what for?"

"I'll get back to you."

Damian got back to him three days later. "You're right. I mean, I know you're right – you're infallible – but I mean this time, you're really right."

"How d'you mean?"

"Well, you know what this is, don't you? World peace. Zero industrial growth. Total faith, hope and charity? It's only the chuffing Kingdom, that's all. It's the Kingdom of God. And to think I almost ruined it. I'm off, Tom. I'm back to Widnes to live in a cave and just *be*. I'm leaving all this behind. A big white underground salt cave. You should come."

"Well..." The fact was Tom really liked that Papal White Newton and he was really getting into the art collection. "I'll catch you later," he said.

He did think about that cave near Widnes, but what if he went into it alone and found nothing there but the ancient advertising jingles that still rattled round his head? What if, when there was no other distraction, that was all there was? He was still not sure. In the cave, he thought, he would be nothing but lonely. That was how he felt when he contemplated eternity. Lonely. Like a God that could not create.

A few days later the official Toyota Martyr of Pope Thomas II hit a wall in Lungoteverre and he found

himself hurtling towards the windscreen. The glass shattered round his head, like the water in a swimming pool, and he plunged headfirst, not into the Roman suburbs but blueness, limitless, expanding blueness. He swam through it for days until he came to a set of turnstiles. They were like the turnstiles at Widnes rugby ground. And off to the side, a nicely polished door with a flunky in front of it, like the one that led to the directors' box. He knew instinctively that this one was for popes. As he went through, Saint Peter was waiting.

"What did you think?" he asked.

Before Thomas could reply the air was full of a bright, brassy sound. A music so pitched that each cell of his mortal body reverberated like glass. And the tune was the Bisto advert complete with all its words, including the verse about dads. Thomas listened.

Hearing these words restored, he was drenched with relief. And at the last remembered with a stabbing vividness the day on the beach. His mother, his father, his brother, himself. All four playing, madly yelling this song, and each filled to bursting with the joyous pointlessness of His Presence.

**Frank Cottrell Boyce**, who lives in Liverpool, is the screenwriter of the recent film *Welcome to Sorojevo* (a script due for publication in book form by Faber & Faber, June 1998). He has written other screenplays and much for television (including episodes of Britain's leading soap, *Coronation Street*). With Steve Appleby and Pete Bishop, he devised "the most brilliant TV science-fiction series ever" – *Captain Star* (children's ITV). The above is his first published short story.

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# Greyer Lensmen

## or, *Looking Backward in Anger*

Gary Westfahl

On the American side of the Atlantic at least, there has been a tremendous amount of recent concern about the so-called “greying of fandom.” Old fogies attend science-fiction conventions and, looking around, seem to see nothing but other old fogies. And they ask, where on earth are the youngsters? Why aren’t fresh young newcomers getting involved with the fanzines, the letter-writing, the organizations, the conventions, and so on? Panellists and chatroom participants bemoan the problem and suggest vigorous new programmes and crusades to attract more young people to the noble enterprise of sf fandom.

Actually, the dearth of young blood in fandom is not really surprising, because it is always hard to recruit soldiers to fight the good fight when the battle has already been won.

Consider the situation in the 1930s, when fandom first emerged as a visible entity. At that time, “science fiction” as a recognized genre was exhibited and celebrated only within the pages of a few, struggling, largely unknown magazines. The likelihood of its continued existence was very much in doubt; and practitioners of the sub-genre of alternate history (about which more later!) could easily construct a scenario in which Hugo Gernsback decides to cut his losses and abandon his sf magazines a few years earlier, the elderly T. O’Conor Sloane dies suddenly and brings *Amazing Stories* to a halt, and Street & Smith opt not to revive *Astounding Stories* – resulting in the disappearance of all the magazines publishing “science fiction,” and indeed the disappearance of the entire genre known by that name (though it undoubtedly would have later recon-

stituted itself and re-emerged under another name and, perhaps, with a different governing ideology).

In this dire situation, sf fandom as a united force was desperately *needed* to keep the genre alive. Their letters and subscriptions encouraged publishers to keep the magazines going; their vocal support boosted the egos of writers who otherwise might have fled from a field offering little in the way of reimbursement; their organizations began to collect and publish sf works, bringing some attention to writers that larger publishers were ignoring; they gathered and preserved magazines, manuscripts, and memorabilia that no one else seemed to care about; and in some cases, fan groups functioned as true charities, dispersing the money they gathered to help out writers and fans with major financial problems. Today, it is easy to ridicule the rhetoric of the Science Fiction League and early fanzines, but the hard work and enthusiasm of those pioneering zealots may have been largely, if not entirely, responsible for the endurance and eventual triumph, for better or worse, of the peculiar American vision of “science fiction” as a distinct literary genre.

Supported by fandom, sf grew larger and better, and major companies soon began to publish sf books, first as small subsidiary operations, later as major sources of income. Magazine rates went up, and films and television plunged into the production of sf, providing profitable work for some writers and increased prominence for their genre. Writing sf was finally becoming rewarding, and things have continued to progress in that direction. However, even as the *financial* problems of sci-

ence fiction were receding, fandom remained an important force in addressing its *aesthetic* problems. Insightful reviewers like Damon Knight and James Blish in the 1950s, and Algis Budrys in the 1960s, castigated inferior work, praised superior work, and provided expert instruction on how to avoid the former and produce the latter. Increasingly numerous and voluminous fanzines presented more and more critical commentaries on contemporary works, and fan scholars like Sam Moskowitz and Alexei Pan-shin schooled new readers in the history of the genre. Prestigious awards – the fans' Hugos and the writers' Nebulas – commemorated and brought attention to noteworthy stories and novels. Collections of essays about the art of sf writing inspired professionals to improve their writing, while manuals like L. Sprague de Camp's *Science Fiction Handbook* offered guidance to neophytes.

Prodded and pushed to meet higher literary standards, many sf writers responded, often impressively; and, as one result, a growing number of academic scholars turned their attention to the genre – a development that has now made the aesthetic guidance of fandom just as superfluous as its other assistance. Yes, literary critics have more than their share of flaws, and I have chronicled many of them at length. But these scholars have been consistently interested in noticing, analyzing and supporting literary quality in science fiction, and their track record in choosing authors to focus their energies on is, on the whole, reasonably good, including such undeniable talents as Philip K. Dick, J. G. Ballard, Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, Octavia E. Butler, William Gibson and Kim Stanley Robinson. And university-based scholars, in addition to their not entirely unhelpful training in literary research and analysis, have at their disposal a number of impressive weapons in promoting superior sf: some clout in getting good books back into print; university libraries to collect and preserve sf books and writers' manuscripts; journals and scholarly studies regularly published by university presses; massive purchases of novels for use as textbooks in college classes; sums of money to pay sf writers to attend conferences or serve as visiting professors; and organizations to support the "literature of the fantastic," "literary fantasy," or another buzzword designed to disguise an enthusiasm for sf from some of these scholars' stuffer colleagues. In contrast to all this, the egoboo of a favourable review in a fanzine or *Analog* would seem like weak tea indeed.

I would never argue that sf fandom

has become *useless*. It is still a wonderful way to come into contact with some highly interesting and usually well-educated people, a slightly weirder version of MENSAs; the vast amounts of books, magazines and memorabilia held by fans remain priceless treasures awaiting further exploration; the sf conventions that earn a profit carry on good work by regularly making charitable contributions to worthwhile genre-related causes; the achievements of fan scholars in the area of bibliography at least are unsurpassed elsewhere;

## ...young people have no reason to believe that the current activities of fandom are vitally important to the genre...

and the research and commentaries of many non-academic critics continue to be salutary and properly appreciated in all circles. (Given a choice between Darko Suvin and John Clute, who could possibly opt for Suvin?) But sf fandom is no longer *essential* to the financial or aesthetic survival of the genre. In the 1930s, if fandom had vanished, the genre of sf might have vanished as well; today, if fandom were to vanish, the genre of sf would keep on trucking, probably not as good as it would have been, but viable and valuable nonetheless.

In essence, therefore, fandom is "greying" because it *succeeded*: coming upon a neglected waif named science fiction, fandom nurtured the child, helped it grow, watched it settle into mature productivity within a supportive environment, and thus,

like any effective parent, made itself superfluous. Observing this situation, young people have no reason to believe that the current activities of fandom are vitally important to the genre, and hence are disinclined to commit many hours of labour to activities that are not vitally important in that way. If they do have free time, they would rather strive to save the whales, feed the homeless, or bring health care to the underprivileged – and who, in the final analysis, can blame them? For that, unlike fandom, unquestionably remains vitally important work.

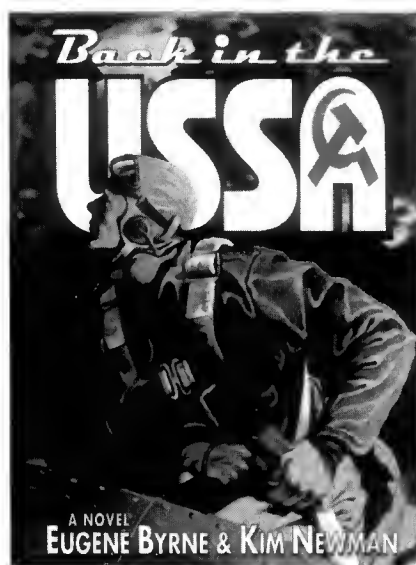
Now, if the greying of *fandom* is an inevitable development which cannot be redressed by energetic outreach programmes and PR campaigns, there is another related but different concern about the potential greying of the entire science-fiction *readership*, which is and always has been much vaster, and more difficult to characterize, than active fandom. Available evidence, while by no

means definitive, does indicate that the average age of the sf reader is slowly but steadily increasing, suggesting that the genre is attracting fewer young readers than before. Such statistics may only reflect the fact that, in general, young people are reading less than they used to, chiefly because there are so many other forms of narrative entertainment available, such as films, television, video and computer games, role-playing games, music videos, and so on. And, since many works in these other forms also fall into the categories of sf or fantasy, it may well be that the total number of young people who *experience* science fiction – not simply those who *read* it – is at an all-time high, and hence that there is no real cause for alarm in their seemingly smaller numbers in the limited area of linear prose narrative.

This may well be the case; but I fear there is another explanation for the advancing age of sf readers, a matter of graver import than a burgeoning profusion of potbellies at sf conventions. A disturbing process may be in motion: the average audience ages slightly, so that writers adjust and write stories for a slightly older audience; this shift in focus causes the average audience to age a bit more, inspiring writers to move a bit more in that direction; and the cycle continues onward towards senescence, if not senility.

As evidence for such a chilling scenario, consider the recently prominent sub-genre of alternate history.

A few months ago, when I turned in an entry on Kim Newman for *The St James Guide to Horror, Ghost, and Gothic Writers*, editor David Pringle



remarked that he found the entry "perhaps a bit lacking in praise." Well, one might say, when struggling to quickly finish one's last four assigned entries in order to be only one month late in meeting the Absolutely, Positively Final Deadline, one might well neglect a few of the niceties of form, such as the inclusion of the proper proportion of complimentary language. But such an explanation would be disingenuous, for I will admit that I did feel a growing irritation as I read several of Newman's works, and that, I must assume, subliminally surfaced while I was writing his entry. Why, I wondered, was an author with such obvious talents increasingly wasting his energies in the puerile and pointless sub-genre of alternate history?

There are, after all, certain expectations long associated with science fiction. Hugo Gernsback quaintly believed that its stories could teach people about science and give inventors useful ideas; a bit more maturely, John W. Campbell maintained that sf could illustrate the process of scientific thinking and provide some helpful guidance regarding whether, or how, to cope with potential scientific or social developments. The erudite readers of *Interzone* might smile at these fanciful aspirations, but underlying and unifying these dubious arguments is a more general and more admirable ideology: the idea that sf is, or should be, a literature focused on the *future*, a literature which might educate people about possible futures, help them come to grips with imminent future breakthroughs, and perhaps encourage people to change or improve the future by means of Awful Warnings or utopian visions.

In contrast, the sub-genre of alternate history is obsessively focused on the past. Utterly unconcerned with changing or improving the future, the authors of alternate histories dedicate themselves to the impossible and fruitless task of changing and improving the past. Essentially an extended version of the Hypothesis Contrary to Fact, an alternate history may at times be a tempting device to illustrate a point (see above!), but such a scenario cannot persuasively support any thesis worthy of attention. True, these stories can "instruct and entertain" in the time-honoured fashion of any literary work, but they might only in the most tangential or serendipitous way be useful in anticipating or dealing with the problems and possibilities of today and tomorrow.

More to the point here, alternate history is unmistak-

ably an old man's literature, studiously ignoring the unsettling present and even more unsettling future to wallow in nostalgia about the Good Old Days, albeit observed through a distorting lens. To me, its writers sound like garrulous old veterans who, having told their war stories dozens of times, are driven to intermingle some whimsical speculations in a desperate effort to maintain the interest of their bored listeners: "Let me tell you, sonny boy, if it had been flying saucers bombing Pearl Harbor, and not Japanese airplanes, well, that would have been a different story, yessirree..." In harmony with the reduced energies of most senior citizens, alternate history is also a lazy man's literature: if writers want to invent some new characters, or come up with some

*...much recent sf in  
prose, film and television  
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popular with young people.*

new stories, that's fine, but if their imaginations are flagging when it comes to characters or plot, they can always drag familiar icons like Benjamin Franklin or Marie Antoinette onto the stage, or they can retell the story of storming the Bastille with a few minimal variations. And coming up with new ideas for stories is as easy, as endless, and as profitless as a running game of shuffleboard: what if space aliens had invaded ancient Greece? What if Charles Manson had secretly replaced Buzz Aldrin on the Apollo 11 moon flight? What if Abraham Lincoln had moved to the South, failed to prosper, and become an embittered drifter driven to assassinate that surprising actor-turned-politician, President John Wilkes Booth?

What if, what if, what if.... to which the only rational response is, who cares? who cares? who cares? I live in an ever-changing world, and I am concerned about what is happening now and what may happen tomorrow; I simply have no time to sit around and wonder, "What would have happened if William Shakespeare had been a werewolf?" But, my personal objections notwithstanding, the broader problem is that, given that modern young people are keenly worried about today and tomorrow, and given that they usually know little and care nothing about yesterday's history, a genre fixated on that subject, even as seen in a funhouse mirror, will surely not be greatly interesting to them. Thus, the growing numbers of alternate history stories testify to a genre with a growing desire to appeal to older readers, and a growing disinclination to appeal to younger readers.

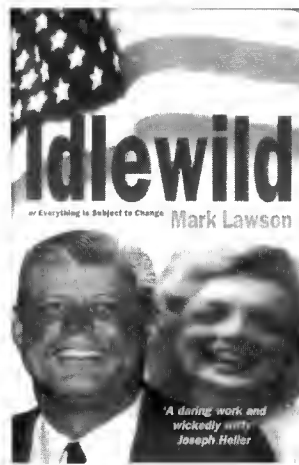
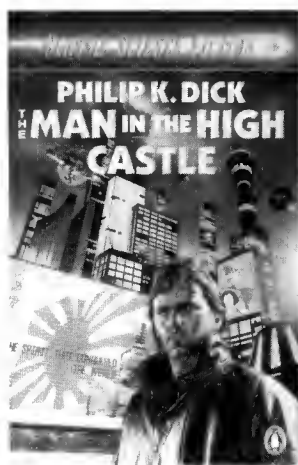
To explain the puzzling popularity of alternate histories, two other points must be pondered. First, the phenomenon to date is effectively limited to prose narrative, since few if any examples come to mind in other media (except for the marginal cases of video and computer games set in the past, like *Castle Wolfenstein*, where an expedition into a vast

Nazi castle eventually leads successful players to an obviously ahistorical confrontation with Adolf Hitler himself). Second, while it is not surprising that prominent strangers to the field ranging from Winston Churchill to Newt Gingrich and Richard Dreyfuss might gravitate to an unchallenging form of fictional speculation unrelated to the historic goals of science fiction, one observes a growing number of major writers seemingly steeped in all the traditions of the genre unaccountably playing this frivolous game. I mean, it's easy enough to dump on Harry Turtledove and William Forstchen, but Brian Stableford's entry on "Alternate Worlds" in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* also cites recent works by Harry Harrison, S. P. Somtow,

William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, James P. Hogan, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Stableford himself, all writers demonstrably attuned to the *Zeitgeist* of true science fiction and fully capable of thoughtfully probing into the possible future of the human race. So, why are they participating in this shuffleboard tournament?

With one chain of thought to unfold, the explanatory matrix will be complete.

While many forms of science fiction have been designed to appeal to juvenile readers, the



standard, and seemingly most powerful, approach is to provide exciting stories of exploration and adventure in outer space. This was how Hugo Gernsback attracted younger readers in the 1930s, how the publishers of Winston juveniles attracted younger readers in the 1950s, and how David Brin currently hopes to attract a new generation of younger readers with a forthcoming series of juvenile sf novels he is sponsoring and supervising. And clearly, much recent sf in prose, film and television indicates that these space stories continue to be popular with young people.

Now, as I have previously suggested in *Science-Fiction Studies*, and in *Interzone*, there are now good reasons to suspect that the traditional picture of near-future human expansion into space permeating modern sf is at best an attractive myth and at worst a pernicious falsehood.

The writers of prose sf, more knowledgeable and more perceptive than the people who create films, television shows, video games, and the like, are most likely to harbour deep suspicions about the validity of this predicted future, and hence are most likely to feel inclined, or even compelled, to avoid writing stories that occur in such a predicted future. Not wishing to tell lies in order to appeal to younger readers, they

instead choose to address older readers with alternate histories, where all of the problematic issues raised by futuristic space fiction are conveniently avoided. And younger people, in response, drift away from prose fiction to the visual media, where creators with less insight and fewer scruples are more than happy to continue dishing out the potted pablum of *The Future According to Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

If this is in fact the bind that modern prose writers are finding themselves in, there is a possible ameliorative solution, albeit a narrow and limited one: to write alternate histories about the space programme, drawing upon the allure of space adventure while still avoiding all consideration of any actual futures humanity might encounter. Interestingly, both Allen Steele and Stephen Baxter have recently published novels exactly along these lines. (Also, currently stored in the directory of one inept, would-be sf writer happens to be a novelette entitled "Charles A. Lindbergh's Flight to the Moon.")

For the most part, however, I can now envision a bleak and bifurcated future for science fiction: on one side, ongoing media or media-derived blatherings about Boldly Going Where No One Has Gone Before into outer space, which will attract only the young and the gullible, and on

the other side, unending and increasingly silly prose revisions of human history, which will attract only the old and the jaded.

And it doesn't have to be this way.

To say that humanity may have no future in exploring space is not necessarily to say that humanity has no future at all. Perhaps the longstanding dreams embedded in sf can now be exposed as fallacious, but it is still possible to imagine that the human race, with the assistance of sf, might soon discover and embrace new and different dreams which could be just as appealing and stimulating as the old goal of conquering the universe. Of course, the despair about finding such comparable dreams I previously conveyed may ultimately be validated, but it is nonetheless disheartening to see a growing number of writers already preparing to forever abandon the pursuit of futuristic dreams in order to live in an old folks' home, frittering away their time examining past impossibilities in order to amuse other senior citizens who have resolved to have nothing further to do with either the present or the future.

So you see, I don't worry at all about the greying of sf fandom, and I worry only a little about the greying of the sf readership; what I deeply worry about, however, is the greying of science fiction itself.

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# The Dust

Jayme Lynn Blaschke

“Goddamn it!” Ayame shouted as the jolt hurled her from her seat, throwing her headlong into the forward console. “Junior, we under attack? What the *hell* is going on?”

The deflectors flashed and sparked madly out the forward portals, bathing the bridge with a harsh, strobing glare.

“Hit something, Captain. *Still* hitting something,” Dante shouted over the blaring alarms. Another jolt tore loose his neuralink to the ship. “Shit! I’m offline. Ship’s flying solo.” Blood trickled from Dante’s temple. He frantically replugged while trying to stabilize the ship manually.

*Captain, deflectors are at 27 percent capacity. Twenty-eight, the balloon-like Synthian navigator thought to her. Desperately its tentacles gripped the harness. Sickly green waves splashed over the coppery air sac, already deflating. Sensor links damaged / offline. We are flying blind / deaf / dumb. Commlinks down. Ship is in immediate danger of destruction / disintegration.*

“Squid, why the hell do you always have bad news for me?” Ayame replied to the Synthian. Her nose and cheek throbbed from where she’d collided with the console. She touched her hand to her face, and it came away wet. Blood. Another jolt rocked the ship.

“That’s it,” Ayame strapped herself into her seat. Every shake threatened to send her lithe body flying. “Squid, shift us back to light. Blind flash. This is ripping us apart.”

*Unable to initiate photon conversion. Lensing field has*

*collapsed / dissipated. Deflectors at 41 percent capacity.*

“That’s more bad news, Squid. You’re really pushing it.” She turned to Dante. “Get comm back up and send a distress signal, Junior. Maybe Niveleur can help. You back on line yet?”

“Yeah, and we’re in deep. The computer’s boggled. We’re on our own.”

“Quit bitching and swing our ass around. We’ll make an emergency burn,” Ayame said.

“Manually? This crate?”

“You’re the hotshot pilot, Junior. Impress me,” she snapped. “Squid, relay that to Lucifer Sam. Tell him to ready engineering for a full burn – everything we’ve got.”

*Done. Sam’s not very happy / amused.*

“What else is new?”

*Deflectors 73 percent of capacity. Current manoeuvre is increasing / speeding deterioration rate.*

“Captain, internal monitoring’s out,” Dante said. “I can’t guarantee the volumetric field will function.”

“Like that makes any difference,” Ayame said. “You’ve got ten seconds before we go to burn.”

*Deflectors at 97 percent capacity.*

“Vent ten seconds. Dante, go to burn now!”

“We’re not in position,” he said. “Gimme five more seconds.”

*Deflectors at 97 percent.*

“We don’t have five seconds!”

The engine thrust slapped Ayame back before the volumetric field took hold. Her stomach heaved, and she fought down her lunch. The ship’s quakes subsided into

the low hum of the fusion drives. *Deflectors at 96 percent capacity. Ninety-four.* The Synthian unstrapped itself and drifted to the floor. *It appears we have survived/lived.*

"*Kamisama.*" She sagged in her seat, blowing a lock of her coarse, black hair from her face. Blood trickled down the gash along her cheek and nose, dripping from her chin. She reached up to daub the wound, and winced at the pain. "Dante?"

He pushed himself up from his console. His thick, curly hair dripped with sweat, his breathing heavy. "I'm going to be sick."

"Aren't we all." Ayame stood shakily, fighting off vertigo.

"We almost died. Oh God, we almost bought it," Dante said. He bent over and shuddered, making muffled choking sounds.

Ayame opened the med kit on the wall and took out a packet of derms. She pressed one to her wrist, and her trembling and panic melted away under the sedative's influence. The hot fire on her cheek dulled to a distant ache. She pressed one onto Dante's neck, and his trembling subsided. "Feeling better?"

He nodded, wiping spittle from the corner of his mouth.

"Can you interface?" she asked. "We need to find out how bad off we are."

"Yes, I think so." He adjusted the neuralink, concentrating. "Internal damage relatively minor, monitors back on-line," he said as the screens before him blinked to life. "Fore hull checks out, but the aft hull took some shots when we swung around. Hiroshi Corp isn't going to be too happy."

"No shit, Junior. It's all our asses unless we've got a damn good excuse," she said, wiping her nose with the sleeve of her azure skinsuit. "Do we have one?"

"I'm not sure." He bent closer to the monitors, brow wrinkled. "Nano just brought external sensors back up. You'd better have a look at this."

Ayame leaned across the cramped bridge, looking over his shoulder. "Dust? You're telling me we ran into a cloud of dust?" She whirled on the Synthian, livid. "Squid, you're the navigator! How could you shift us from light in the middle of a goddamned dust cloud?"

*I did not. There is no dust cloud of significant/insignificant density charted in this sector/system/orbit,* Squid replied, glaring at her with its single, palm-sized compound eye. *I do not/never make mistakes. If you doubt/distrust my skill/ability then I suggest you find yourself another navigator, Captain. I seem to have partially vented/deflated. If you'll excuse me, Captain, I'm retiring to my quarters/pool to reflate. Unless, of course, you don't think I'm capable of finding my quarters.* It reached out and grabbed a hand-hold with a tentacle, abruptly pulling itself off the bridge.

"Damn." Ayame slammed her fist into the bulkhead.

Dante stared at her, lips pursed.

"It's like this, Junior," she said. "Synthians are hypersensitive in a funny sort of way. You can shitride them all day long and they don't flinch, but if you even *think* of questioning their competence... I'll have to go apologize later. I've known Squid for a long time. He'll get over it."

"I hope so. I've flashed ships into light before, but I've never flashed from photons to tachyons."

"I wouldn't want you to, either. Squid's got all the navigation systems set up in octal," she said, then grinned at his grimace. "Don't worry, Squid'll be his old self

before we put in at Niveleur. Which reminds me – you'd better send out another message, advising them of our status. They haven't had a Union ship show up for 150 years. They're probably boggling by now."

"God bless, Ayame. What'd you go off and say to the Squid? I just seen him skulking down the hall," Lucifer Sam said, his baritone voice several decibels too loud, as usual. He swung his red-bearded bulk down into the bridge, squeezing past the Synthian's harness. His mossy, crimson eyebrows threatened to leap off his face and attack at any moment. He wore a derm on his left wrist.

"Usual shit, Sam," Ayame said. "We came out of light and did a header into a dust cloud. I jumped its ass about it. Squid said it wasn't its fault, and flashed."

"Uh huh. Just you being your usual diplomatic self, eh Ayame? Pissin' its billabong." He stopped, noticing their injuries. "God bless, Ayame. You know I can't stand blood. Here, hold still a mite." He pulled a small nano injector from his tech vest, tagging Ayame's cheek and Dante's temple. "No broken bones? Good. The critters should fix you up. Now, I want to know who's going to fix the ship up? That little rodeo of yours snapped the locking clamps in the docking bay. I had to set up a magnetic isolation field to keep the shuttle from bouncing through the bulkheads. The critters and myself can keep the innards of this crate on-line, but we can only do so much. We've got *hull* damage for godssakes."

"A couple of dents, Sam, a couple of dents," Ayame said. "We lived, that's what matters. I'm more interested in this cloud we're in. Junior?"

"Uh, okay. Hang on a second, we've just matched speed," Dante said.

The fusion engines shut down with a faint tremor, and Ayame's ears popped as the volumetric field released its hold.

"Shield's shouldn't have any trouble now," Dante said, calling up the sensor data to the screen in front of him. "Broad scan indicates micro particles composed of silicates, carbons, oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen, traces of heavy metals – the works." He leaned back and waved his hand at the screen. "We, my friends, are in a dust cloud. Plain and simple."

"That Squid claims shouldn't be here. Doesn't sound so bloody plain and simple to me," Sam said, calling up the Niveleur system charts on the next console. He skimmed the data, frowning. "Well, the Squid was right, not that there was ever any doubt. No clouds anywhere near."

"That shouldn't be," Ayame said. "Niveleur was a frontier world, but it was settled for more than two hundred years before the Kaanan War broke contact. This whole region was thoroughly charted. They wouldn't miss a dust cloud in their own backyard. Dante, what does Niveleur say about the cloud?"

"Nothing." He shrugged. "They haven't replied to our distress signal yet."

"They haven't answered?" Ayame shot Sam a puzzled look. "Are they ignoring us, think we're invading? Dante, tell them we're the freighter *Hiroshi Boeki* out of *Shumbun No Hi* here to establish a trade route."

"There's nothing," he said, shaking his head. "Not even background garble. This whole system's quiet."

"They using tight beam?" Sam asked.

"No way. There's always leakage in a habited system."

If there's any in this system, I'd hear it. There isn't."

Ayame gave him a dubious look.

"Okay, look. My first job was smuggling nanofusion tech into Cibola under Captain Coronado," Dante explained quickly. "We had to dodge Union interdiction corvettes. Those things are fast and quiet. Top of the line, and a whole lot more quiet than a planet. He – Captain Coronado, I mean – he taught me to peg 'em a light-hour away with standard comm tech, and we're less than a light-minute out from Niveleur. I'm telling you, there's no way a whole system can stealth."

"I don't like this, guys. I don't like this one bit," Ayame said, biting a knuckle. "Dante, call up a real-time image of Niveleur."

"No sooner said than..."

"*Kamisama*," Ayame said softly. Instead of vibrant green and blue, bleak greys and browns swathed the planet. "Dante, that can't be Niveleur."

"The computer says it is. Orbit and mass check out, but... there's no trace of an atmosphere. Radiation levels within normal limits. No sign of life."

"That can't be right," Sam said. "Niveleur or not, a planet that size should have *something* around it."

"How about this." Ayame bent forward, bracing an arm against the bulkhead above the console. "Dante, run a check on that star's spectrum. See if it matches Niveleur's." She glanced down at Dante, and her mouth curled into a half smile. "You can stare at my tits later, Junior. Right now you've got work to do."

Sam rolled his eyes.

"Uh, here we go." Dante flushed. "Bad news. Star's spectrum is a perfect match."

"Well, I guess that settles it. This is the place," Ayame straightened. "The question now is how did this happen? Junior, run comparisons on the rest of the system. Any ideas, Sam?"

"Nothing good," he said, shaking his head. "Couldn't have been the Keynans, not way out here. Someone else?"

Ayame shrugged. "Doesn't make sense. How do you strip a planet like this, and why would you want to? And where's the atmosphere? *Hen na*."

"It gets stranger, Captain," Dante said. "The other two terrestrial planets – D'hiver and Fourneau – they're both the same as Niveleur."

"And the gas giants?"

"Mass checks, but their density... Jesus." Dante shook his head. "This is impossible, but the giants are now terrestrial. And there's something else. There's traces of dust scattered throughout the system, concentrated along the planetary orbits."

Ayame shut her eyes and sat on her haunches, cradling her forehead in her palms.

"I know what you're thinking," Sam said, crossing his arms. "You're wrong. Squid didn't flinch on the flash."

"Then what else could it be?" She didn't look up. "This is the Niveleur system, but it's not the one we know."

"Wait a minute." Dante snapped around, yanking loose his interfaces. He pointed a quivering finger at Ayame. "You think Squid boggled the shift from tachyons to photons and we slipped timestreams? There're safety margins."

"An instant is all it would take," Ayame said.

"But we'd still be in our timestream now, right?"

Dante said quickly. "Any changes our presence causes wouldn't manifest themselves until we return, right? Time disruptions aren't retroactive. Boggling a flash couldn't explain that." He jabbed a thumb at the barren image of Niveleur.

"In theory, yes," Sam said, inclining his head slightly. "But you're forgetting one little thing."

"What?"

"No bugger who's ever slipped timelines has ever returned to confirm those theories," Sam said, tossing his hands up. "For all we know, the slightest timeslip could just as soon put you in a universe where Earth never coalesced and Velociraps are philosopher-kings."

Dante blanched.

"Not to worry, though, mate. I've known the Squid longer than even Ayame. He didn't flinch it."

*Thank you, Lucifer Sam. At least someone still trusts my abilities.* Airsac fully inflated, Squid floated through the hatchway, glistening wet.

"Squid," Ayame said, puzzled. "I, ah, didn't expect to see you back here so soon."

*I'm only here to tell / inform you of my departure / resignation. I can not effectively function / perform as a member of this crew if my competence is doubted / mistrusted,* it said. *Don't act so surprised / dismayed. You humans transmit / blare your thoughts like navigation beacons. Accusing me of navigating us into a dust cloud is insult enough, but a timeslip?*

"We was only considering all the possibilities, mate," Sam said quickly. "No one meant anything –"

*I still consider you a friend, Lucifer Sam,* Squid thought. *Please don't threaten that by insulting my intelligence.*

"But Squid, the system's dead," Ayame said. "Look, I'm sorry for jumping on you. You're the best navigator I've ever had, and I mean that. I just spout off the top of my head sometimes, but I don't mean it."

Sam and Dante exchanged glances.

"We need you now," she said. "We have to flash back immediately to report this. We need you to plot our flash."

*You need no such thing,* Squid thought, ignoring the apology. *Dante is proficient / competent at light flashes, and is capable of plotting through to tachyons. I will review / correct his calculations when he is finished for any obvious errors, but I will no longer function as navigator. My resignation is final.*

Sam whistled lowly as Squid disappeared through the hatch. Ayame stared, mouth agape.

"So what, this is part of the ritual or something?" Dante asked.

"Bloody hell," Sam said. "You *did* piss its billabong."

"Okay, hotshot," Ayame said, taking a deep breath, "how familiar are you with base eight?"

"The corporation is very disappointed," Miko Tagomi said.

Ayame nodded, eyes downcast, hands folded in her lap. A thin, pink scar was all that remained of the gash across her cheek and nose.

Tagomi studied her thoughtfully from behind the gleaming, black, kidney-shaped desk. Lines crinkled at the edges of her flinty black eyes. The room suited her. Marbled white carpet, sterile blue liquiglass walls and a small bonsai tree on the lip of the desk – nano-maintained, no doubt. Austere. Functional.

"You were to re-establish contact with Niveleur, and

forge an exclusive trading pact with them for the Corporation. Instead, all you bring back is word of failure,” Tagomi said, closing out the report file on her desk’s monitor. “The damage to the ship can be overlooked. After all, the hazards of space are to be expected to manifest themselves every so often, *neh?* The Synthian’s resignation from the employ of the corporation, though, is a different matter.”

“*Hai*, Tagomi-san.”

“Synthians are the most efficient alien navigators able to co-exist with humans. That is why we use them,” Tagomi said. “It will cost the corporation considerably to secure the services of another.”

“I meant no insult to the Synthian,” Ayame said. “The evidence suggested it was in error, and I spoke without thinking. Later, I realized my mistake, but it would not accept my apology. I have never known a Synthian to act that way.”

“There was a time, Ayame Yono, when *Nipponjin* were more respectful of another’s honour. In that way, at least, the Synthians are perhaps more like our ancestors than we are,” Tagomi said, tapping her forefinger against her chin. “You are one of our brightest captains, Ayame, that is why you were chosen for the mission. Your lack of success reflects upon me. I personally selected you.”

Ayame’s eyes widened. “*Domo sumimasen.*”

“There are members of the board of directors who wish to place the blame of our lost investment on you. This I will not allow,” Tagomi said. “Your crews’ account of the mission reflects favourably upon you. With the exception of the incident with the Synthian, you performed your duties well, considering the circumstances. You are still one of our most promising captains. I won’t have a second such valuable asset made available for our competition to use against us.”

“Thank you, Tagomi-san.”

“You are suspended until the outcome of the formal inquiry,” Tagomi said. “In the future, Ayame, do not be so fast to place blame for failure.”

Ayame bowed to Tagomi, then turned and left the office. Once in the hall, she collapsed against the wall, releasing a deep breath. Vice President Tagomi had taken an interest in her. A double-edged sword. Ayame realized her hands were trembling. She composed herself, then made her way to the station’s restaurant.

The clear, polarized ceiling offered a spectacular view of the cosmos. As the station spun on its axle every ten minutes, she got a complete 360-degree view of her ship, along with six others of various design moored at the main docking spire.

“So, Ayame. Tagomi rip you a new asshole?” Sam asked through a mouthful of broiled pseudo-shrimp.

“No, she didn’t,” Ayame said, taking a seat. “Where’s Junior?”

“Went to grab some shut-eye,” Sam answered, shoving a leafy green mass into his mouth. “Can’t say as I blame him. If Tagomi grilled him half as hard as she did me... I don’t think she ever swallowed the notion it took Dante two days to work out calculations the Squid could figure in an hour.”

“After my conversation with her, I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” Ayame said, making a selection from the menu. The tabletop dome opened, and a steaming plate of lasagne slid out. “I’m suspended until the

inquiry’s over. They’re more upset about me boggling it with Squid than anything else.”

“I comp’d as much,” Sam said, putting down his fork. “They asked me about that. Since the Union’s gotten involved, you’re pretty much untouchable.”

“The Union?”

“Tagomi didn’t tell you? The Union’s all worked up over this. They’re worried that what happened to Niveleur could happen here, so they’re sending out two corvettes to investigate,” Sam said. “That’s brought a lot of prestige to Hiroshi Corp – all that ‘civic duty’ kind of crap.”

Above, a freighter disembarked from the spindle as the crescent of *Shumbun No Hi* drifted into view. Ayame watched as tiny flashes of manoeuvring thrusters pushed it away from the station.

“You know, we’re very lucky dingos, us four,” Sam said.

“In what way? I mean besides the fact we’re not unemployed.”

“Take a gander at our ship up there,” he said, pointing up. Half a dozen black scars marred the larger of the freighter’s two spherical hulls. “See that small hit we took, the one at the ass, next to the engines?”

Ayame nodded. Just outside the radiation plating a tiny dark patch blistered the hull.

“Damn near ruptured our deuterium tanks. We shoulda gone boom,” he said. “The strange thing is that the internal monitors never picked it up. Like it wasn’t even there. I only noticed it a few minutes ago.”

An involuntary shiver ran through her body. Ayame concentrated on her meal, but could not rid her mind of the image of that tiny scar blowing her ship apart. Even after the station’s rotation took the ship out of view, her uneasiness persisted.

Ayame stared into the darkness above her bunk until her subconscious began forming shapes out of the black. “*Kamisama*,” she said, kicking off the sheets. For the second night in a row, sleep eluded her.

“Window, open,” she said. The room’s single, narrow window faded from opaque to transparent, illuminating the room with a shaft of ghostly light from the planet below. Ayame folded the bunk into the wall, and slid her desk and chair into the tiny closet cubicle.

Naked, she stood in the centre of the bare room, the cool floor chilling her feet. Clearing her mind, she began her first *kata*. Empty, the room was just big enough for Ayame to perform *Tae kwon do*. Focused, she worked her body through each move. Finishing her first *kata*, she began the second.

An hour later, she completed her workout. Muscles burning, glistening with sweat, she stepped to the window and leaned against it. Ayame’s slight breasts flattened against the metal. The coolness felt good. Her heavy breaths fogged the clear steel, and she wiped it clean.

The spindle was barely visible from her room. Ayame counted the seconds until the *Hiroshi Boeki* came into view. One minute. Two. The freighter peeked over the edge of the station wheel. Shadow cloaked the hull, hiding the dust damage. For an instant, her perception shifted, the shadow becoming one giant scar.

Her eyes narrowed. “What is it that’s bothering you, Ayame?” she said aloud. She peeled herself from the window and slipped on a sleeveless red pullover and

black skinshorts. Tying her hair back, she stepped into the empty hall, blinking in the light.

Ayame passed through the residential area, quiet at the late hour. Accompanied only by the soft *slap, slap* of her bare feet on the hard floor, she walked across the Spoke C commons. Two freighter crewmen she didn't recognize ate an early breakfast in the cafeteria, while a lone custodian herded the day's litter to the cycling chutes with a sonic whisk.

She took the lift up to the axle, then a second one out to the spire, away from the centrifical gravity of the wheel. As the lift slowed, Ayame felt the volumetric field grab her weightless body.

The lift door opened. "Destination?" an electronic voice asked.

"*Hiroshi Boeki*," Ayame said. The volumetric field nudged her out into the bay. Worker robots ponderously jetted about the cavern, wrestling massive cargo canisters from the open hold of one freighter, loading equally bulky canisters into another.

"Identification, please," another electronic voice said as the field deposited Ayame at her mooring.

"Yono, Ayame," she answered. Infrared scanned her eye.

"Identification confirmed." The hatch opened. She entered.

Only the feeble glow of safety lights lit the interior of the ship. She pulled herself through the silent freighter, using the handholds along the wall. *Just like Squid*, she couldn't help thinking.

Ayame floated through the hatchway onto the darkened bridge, and settled into her seat.

"Computer, wake up," she said. The bridge lit up, and the console winked on. "What is ship status?"

"Currently in standby mode awaiting repairs."

"External damage report."

"Level two damage in four areas of hull B. Level one damage in six areas of hull B. Level one damage in two areas of hull A."

Ayame snapped forward. "Request clarification. Did you say hull A has sustained level one damage?"

"Yes."

"Why wasn't this damage included in the ship status report in the Niveleur system?"

"Damage was not present at that time."

"When did it happen?"

"Unknown."

Ayame's scalp prickled. "Display exterior of ship."

The *Hiroshi Boeki* materialized before her. The image rotated, clearly showing the blackened scars of damage.

"Computer, remove all damaged areas recorded in the ship status report from the hologram."

Only half of the darkened areas vanished.

"*Kamisama*," Ayame whispered. "What is going on? Computer, run a broad scan of the damaged areas."

"Scan indicates concentrated presence of sub-microscopic particles composed of aluminum, iron, mercury, tungsten, copper and other trace metals in addition to silicates, carbons, oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen..."

"Run a nano-resolution scan on the dust, now!" she shouted.

"Nano scan indicates highly detailed structural arrangement..." the computer announced, but Ayame wasn't listening. She only stared at the holographic image hovering before her.

"Mother-fucker!"

"You awoke me because of a *virus*?" Miko Tagomi, dressed in an orange and black kimono, glared at Ayame.

"Not just a virus, Tagomi-san," Ayame said quickly. They stood just inside the door of Tagomi's apartment, the foyer alone larger than Ayame's entire room. Silvery carpet even deeper than that in Tagomi's office covered the floor, and the walls were real wood. "In spaceflight training, stories – frontier legends – are told about killer robots, von Neumann probes that attack planets, reproduce themselves and move on to the next planet. I believe that is what destroyed Niveleur."

"So you're saying we're being attacked by a doomsday weapon?" Tagomi's tone was no less sharp, but Ayame saw she'd begun digesting the information.

"Maybe not a weapon. It appears to be alive."

"Are you sure?"

"*Hai*. It resembles a virus in some ways, bacteria in others. Maybe it evolved in a nebula, spread by solar winds – I don't know. I do know it's perfectly suited to space." Ayame pulled a portable datapad from her waistband and handed it to Tagomi. "Everything I found out is there. The dust is resistant to vacuum and hard radiation. It may be photosynthetic, I couldn't tell. It's extremely mutable, adapting to whatever elements are available to reproduce."

Tagomi looked up from the pad, the lines in her face deepening. "Your ship?"

"Completely infected. The dust's having a tough time with the metals in the hull, but it's nearly through to inner shell in several places. It's spreading like scatter-shot through the sensor net and outer-hull systems. Repair and containment's hopeless. It eats nano for breakfast," Ayame said. "I scanned the other four ships docked, and they're infected, too. So's the station."

"This is... most distressing," Tagomi said, tapping her chin. "You were correct to bring this to my attention. I will call an immediate meeting of the board of directors in the morning to consider our response to this difficulty."

"Tagomi-san?" Ayame asked, incredulous. "Our response is clear. We alert the Union and quarantine *Shumbun No Hi*."

"*Iie*!" The force of Tagomi's command stunned Ayame. "You will speak of this to no one. There is liability to consider, loss of face, reparations. The board will decide how to clean up this mess you have made, Ayame."

"But four freighters have left since we docked. If the dust spread to them there's no telling how many other ships and systems they'll infect."

"There are two Union corvettes investigating the Niveleur system now," Tagomi said. "If they return in a few days, perhaps we blame the infection on them, *neh*? Forget about this conversation, Ayame. The corporation will handle things. You may leave now."

"God bless, Ayame! Do you know what time it is?" Sam yawned, rubbing his eyes. "Where's your shoes?"

"Get dressed, Sam, and hurry. We're in it deep. Way over our heads."

"What are you talking about, woman?"

Ayame explained.

"Contaminated ships have already gone out? Bloody hell," Sam said, then grunted. "And Tagomi wants to

cover it up. Beautiful. Is she in- *fucking* -sane?"

"We've got to get a warning out. Have the Union set up a quarantine."

"Of course we've got to get a warning out. Question is, how're we going to do it? All the ships here are already contaminated. If we radioed the outer planet stations, corporation security would clamp down so fast..."

Ayame shook her head. "There's one ship here still dust-free."

"What're you... God bless, Ayame. You can't be serious."

"The *Hiroshi Boeki* shuttle," she said. "The magnetic containment field is still up. The dust can't get through, I've already checked. I need you to set up a portable field to keep the dust off of us when we go through the freighter."

"It won't work," Sam said, shaking his head. "The field surrounding the shuttle isn't mobile. Soon as we leave the hangar, we're dusted."

"We don't leave the hangar. We flash straight to light."

"Flash in the hangar? You can't do that."

"No, but Squid can," Ayame said. "Besides, the shuttle's navigation system is set up in octet. Somehow I don't think we have two days to wait on Dante to puzzle out our flash."

"Can you convince Squid?" Sam asked, scratching his beard.

Ayame shrugged. "Don't have much of a choice, do I?" She started down the hall at a trot. "You grab Junior and get that portable field working. Squid and I'll meet you in the bay."

She took the lift down two levels. A ramp broke off the main corridor, and she climbed it up to the Synthian section.

"Squid? It's me, Ayame. Open up," she said, keying the visitor pad. "I know you can hear me. I wouldn't be here if this wasn't important. Let me in, or I'm coming in on my own."

No response.

"Okay. Have it your way." She placed her palm on the pad, and the door swooshed open.

Humidity grabbed her like a vice as the door closed behind her. Warm, wet air pooled in her lungs, and Ayame coughed twice before her breathing calmed.

The solid floor ended just a metre past the door, a translucent pool of calm, green water filling the ten metres beyond that. Soft, neutral light reflected off the minute waves of the pool, little will-o-the-wisps dancing along the bare walls and ceiling. Vague, fishy shapes darted about below the surface.

"Squid?" Ayame called softly from the edge. "I know you don't sleep, Squid. You and I have got to talk."

A fish-thing splashed near the surface, then disappeared.

"Damn. You're going to make me come in after you, aren't you?" Ayame pulled off her top and tossed it beside the door. Cautiously, she tested the water with a toe. A faint touch of electricity charged the water. Her skin prickled, dark nipples hardening. Ayame closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and stepped off the edge.

The water closed over her head, colder than she'd thought. For an instant the fear of drowning flashed through her mind, but then her feet touched bottom. A school of eel fingerlings darted past her, quickly vanishing in the translucent waters. Ayame pushed herself

back up to the surface, gulped a lungful of salty air, then dove.

A small suckerfish darted up to her and tried to attach itself to her stomach, but she brushed it away. Ayame picked out a dim shape ahead, and pushed herself toward it. She swam along the smooth floor, surprisingly clean of any detritus. Squid hovered in a narrow alcove, vents on either side circulating fresh water. His balloon, completely deflated, hooded his eye and stretched back smoothly along his bony collar.

*You should not have come.*

*We have to talk,* Ayame thought. *It's important. We need you.*

*There is nothing to say/discuss,* Squid answered. *I'm no longer employed by Hiroshi Corp.*

*Neither am I. Or at least I won't be as soon as they find out what I'm trying to do. Things are bad.*

*Perhaps you should explain/clarify.*

*Can I do it at the surface? I need to breathe.*

*Of course.*

Ayame broke the surface with a loud splash, and Squid surfaced next to her.

*Better?* Squid asked.

She nodded between breaths, treading water. "The dust. It's not dust, it's a virus. My guess is the Nivele picked it up on one of their exploration missions, and infected their system. Now we've infected this system, and contaminated ships've already left for other systems. You comp?"

Squid stared at her silently. "The corporation's going to try to cover it up. Blame it on the Union corvettes," she said. "That or hang my ass out to dry. Maybe all of us. That bitch Tagomi gave me a sermon on honour because I boggled things with you. Honour, of all things. The whole speech was a shitride. Fuck me, you, the whole goddamn galaxy as long as the Corporation's stock doesn't take a hit."

Ayame swam forward, placing her hands on Squid's collar, either side of its eye. She kicked awkwardly to keep her head above water.

"I won't be a part of it, Squid. The *Hiroshi Boeki*'s totally boggled, but the shuttle's clean. Sam's containment field protected it," she said. "Trouble is, if it moves out of the field, it's dusted. We have to flash inside the hangar. We need you to navigate."

*That is improbable/impossible,* Squid answered. *I thought you understood. I have renounced...*

"Haven't you listened to anything I've said?" Ayame's shout echoed off the walls. "At least four other systems are infected because we fucked around here for two days. The entire Niveleur system is dead. Do you understand that? *This* system is dead, along with any others that have been contaminated. There's no stay of execution. You are dead if you don't leave, and Synthian or not, I guarantee the Corporation will string you up long before the dust can even touch you."

Ayame pushed herself roughly back, slapping a lock of dripping hair out of her face.

"You don't honestly think Dante can navigate a flash like that, do you? It took him two days to work out a straight jump from Niveleur, and he damn near boggled that," she said. "He knows he can't do it, but at least he's man enough to *try*. We're going to try, you know. With or without you, we're going to make the flash."

Squid slowly sank, leaving only ripples.

"Okay then. Screw you, Squid." Ayame trembled. "I know I'm a bastard sometimes, Squid, but at least I don't hide behind some damn self-serving notion of integrity. I used to think you and Sam were my only two real friends. Looks like I was off by one."

*I suggest you get out of the pool. I doubt you'll find this very comfortable / tolerable.*

"What?" Ayame peered down into the water. "Are you threatening me?"

Ayame yelped as the electrical jolt hit her, sending her splashing. She flopped out of the pool onto her side, chest heaving.

Beneath the surface, white sparks flashed rapidly, slowly rising. Ayame glanced down, and saw dozens of fish pressed up against the pool walls.

Squid surfaced, its balloon stretching, filling with gas. Ayame stared in fascination, white sparks reflecting in her eyes. Burgundy waves wafted across the coppery balloon, now a metre wide and twice as tall. Squid rose out of the pool, tentacles streaming water.

"Squid!" Ayame pushed herself up.

*Apology acknowledged / accepted... I think, Squid said. Just try not to be such a bitch / annoyance around me in the future, okay?*

"I love you, Squid," Ayame said, kissing its balloon. Golden ripples spread out. "We have to hurry. Tagomi's not stupid. If she even begins to suspect I've talked to you guys about the dust, we'll have security guards coming out our ass."

She grabbed a tentacle, and the two of them left the room together.

Sam and Dante stood waiting in the bay, outside the lift. Dante, hair wild, face drawn, focused on the console he'd plugged in to.

"I'll be damned. You did make up with Squid. I've got to admit, Ayame, I didn't think you had it in you," Sam said. Four children's mag-ball wristbands hung linked together from his shoulder, jacked into his tech vest.

"Don't tell me that's our force field," Ayame said. "Please tell me it's not."

"Well, what do you expect on such short notice?" Sam groused. "It'll work for what we need. The vest'll amp the fields enough to protect us as long as we stick close. These wristbands ain't going to last long at these power levels, but from what Junior tells me, we don't want to dilly-dally anyway."

"It may be too late," Dante said, unplugging. Red streaked his eyes. Stimulants. "The ship's losing atmosphere, and that means dust's inside. Not enough to trigger alarms, but you can bet it will be before too long. Hull integrity's nil in about four places. If we're in there when a bulkhead gives..."

Dante, Sam and Ayame grimaced at Squid's mental wince of a balloon bursting.

"Bloody Hell, Squid. Keep your phobias to yourself," Sam snapped.

*Sorry / apologies.*

"We go in, now," Ayame said. "If we don't make it to the shuttle, then we'll die here sooner or later. I don't know about you guys, but I'd rather suck vacuum than have that dust eat me from the inside out."

"If it's a vote we're taking, I favour heart attack by way of a half-dozen nubile young women." Sam

shrugged at Ayame's cool gaze. "Only a thought."

"If there're no more thoughts, let's get this over with," Ayame said. "Sam?"

The air crackled as he activated the field. "We've only got five minutes or so. And I'm serious, stick close."

"*Hiroshi Boeki*," Ayame said. The volumetrics nudged the foursome into the bay. Worker robots continued about their tasks, oblivious. The field deposited them at the mooring, and the security unit accepted Ayame's clearance. The hatch opened.

"At least Tagomi didn't change the codes on us," Sam said.

"Small favours," Ayame said. She started forward, but Squid caught her with a tentacle. "Squid, what are you doing?"

*If we touch anything in the ship, we could contaminate ourselves,* Squid said, wrapping arms tightly about Sam and Dante as well. Squid's balloon grew, stretched taut. *I can jet / propel us to the hangar / shuttle.*

"Are you sure?" Ayame asked.

*Not really / no.* Squid released a puff of air, and they floated into the ship. Darkness enveloped them.

"Dust's shorted the light circuits," Sam said. "Hang on a second. Squid, move your arm. There we go." Twin beams of white light flashed on from the collar of his vest.

*Thank you, Sam.* Squid nudged them forward with a hiss of air. Dust glinted in the light.

"Can you make this corner?" Dante asked.

*No problem.* Squid expertly wheeled about the corner, into the hangar.

The dull white, manta-like shuttle hovered in mid-air before them. Two twisted mooring booms folded along the catwalk ringing the cylindrical hangar. The four triangular hangar bay doors were directly below the shuttle. Dust floated in the hangar, but the metre or so around the shuttle was clean.

"At least the field's still up," Sam said.

A metallic groan echoed through the ship.

"Bulkhead's about to go," Dante said.

"Squid, get us over there, quick," Ayame said.

The magnetic fields buzzed in protest as they merged. Dante opened the hatch, then disappeared inside. Ayame, then Sam followed, and before Squid sealed the hatch, the shuttle's systems hummed with power.

"Good work, Junior," Ayame said, strapping herself in.

Squid settled up into its harness, purging itself of excess air with a sudden, flatulent burp.

"Squid, how's it going?" Ayame asked.

*Beginning preliminary / initial calculations,* it answered.

"Squid'd better hurry," Dante said. "I wasn't joking about that bulkhead going."

"Let Squid worry about the flash. You just get the hangar open," Ayame said.

"Shit." Dante pressed his index and middle fingers against his interface.

"What? What is it, Junior?" she asked.

"The hangar doors. They're not opening."

"Don't joke with me, Junior," Ayame said.

"Jesus. We're bogged," he said, his voice rising an octave. "I can't make contact with the *Hiroshi Boeki*. Computer's offline. Power's offline." Dante turned to Ayame. "The whole fucking ship's dead. I can't open the hangar doors. Hell, I can't do *shit*."

"Sam, *Hiroshi Boeki*'s dead in space," Ayame said into

the comm link. "Dante can't get the hangar open."

"God bless!" Sam answered from the engine room. "We're boggled now. If the ship's dead, there's no way to open 'em up."

"Can't you..." Ayame started. "Can't we blast them open, or something?"

"With what? If we were on a frigate, sure. But in case you haven't noticed, this is a bloody shuttle, and we're in a bloody freighter."

"Well, damn it Sam —" A sharp boom cut her off.

"Hull's ruptured!" Dante shouted. The shuttle shuddered. "Magnetic field's still up. I'm compensating for drift. Orienting shuttle to hangar doors."

"That's it, then. We're out of options, unless anyone gets a sudden inspiration." Ayame glanced at Squid. The navigator worked furiously at its station.

"Captain, docking control is hailing us," Dante said.

"Ignore them," she said. "Squid? You have something?"

*I'm plotting/hurrying our flash,* Squid answered curtly. *Dante, raise/activate lensing field.*

"Lensing field up," Dante answered. "Jesus, Squid, I hope you've got a miracle somewhere in that balloon of yours."

"Squid, if we flash to light with the hangar closed..."

*I'm aware of that. I'm plotting a minimal duration of photon state to allow an immediate/instant/quick conversion to tachyon,* Squid said. *Now, if you'll excuse me, these calculations are considerably more complex/difficult/hazardous than usual, and we seem to be pressed/rushed for time.*

"Squid, we've got six metres of open space between us and the doors! Light travels pretty goddamned fast, and I don't think, what? one billionth of a second? is going to be enough to flash through to tachyons," Ayame said. "Besides, I know tachyons are pretty much unaffected by the here and now, but I've never heard of them used to get out of a locked room."

"Jesus, Captain," Dante shouted. "What the hell are you trying to do? Piss Squid off again?"

"*Kamisama,*" Ayame said, thumping herself on the forehead. "Squid, you go right on with those calculations. It's up to you to get us out of here."

*That is what I've been trying/attempting to do.*

A sensor beeped.

"Oh no," said Dante. "Everyone, hang on. Main propellant tank's de-stabilizing. In about three seconds we're going to have deuterium —"

The tank blew, ripping the *Hiroshi Boeki* from the spire.

"We're venting Deuterium. Scan shows fissures spreading along aft hull. Atmosphere's gone," Dante shouted. Another shock threw him against his restraints. "Magnetic field's collapsing. I can't keep us aligned."

"Squid," Ayame said, "flash now!"

The *Hiroshi Boeki* exploded in a sudden, silent cloud of hydrogen.

"You ever wonder, Sam? How about you, Dante?" Ayame asked, absently examining her *sake*. "I mean, did we really make any kind of difference?"

The three of them sat slouched along the edge of Squid's pool, steadily draining the bottle.

"Sure," Sam said, pouring himself another *sake*. "Instead of unemployed, broke and blackballed, hated by twelve systems, we'd be dead and hated by several

hundred systems."

The Union had identified eight infected systems initially, and clamped down the most extensive quarantine in history. A massive effort mobilized to evacuate the non-contaminated outposts in the restricted systems — mostly isolated mining and research facilities — leaving behind the vast majority of the populace in the inner system. Blockade runners and private yachts constantly attempted escape, and although most met with disintegration from the Union fleet, some slipped through. Dust had reached four more systems since the quarantine was established — stretching Union resources thinner and thinner.

"At least we don't have to worry about Hiroshi Corp coming after us. That's something," Dante said. The Union's seizure of all Hiroshi Corp assets had been almost immediate. "Just because Nuevo Santiago didn't take us on doesn't mean one of the other carriers won't."

"Just keep on believing that, Junior," Ayame said. "We turned on our master. As far as the big lines are concerned, that's mortal sin."

"I just want to get out of here before the magistrate decides to string us up," Sam said. "Once things get really tense with the quarantine, they'll want more scapegoats. There's probably dozens of charges they could bring against us. 'Negligent introduction of hazardous alien species.' Shit like that."

*The demand/need for Synthian navigators is very high,* Squid said, floating up to the edge of the pool. *Perhaps I could use my value to secure/obtain/force assignments for you.*

"Maybe the big freight lines would take you, alone," Ayame said, "but I don't think even a Synthian navigator is worth taking on us other three."

*I didn't necessarily mean/imply the major lines. I was thinking/considering independent/small operations.*

"You mean smugglers?" Ayame gaped.

"Now, hold on, Ayame," Sam said. "I know you're a company woman through to the core, but it ain't all that bad an idea. Wasn't all that long ago I was working the independent circuit, and we know Dante here cut his teeth with Coronado. We need to drop out of sight, and independents aren't all that keen on record-keeping. Besides, not *everything* they do is illegal."

*A Synthian would be very valuable for an independent, for prestige/respect/attention alone,* Squid said. *I'm sure I could convince/persuade them to assign us a ship of our own.*

"What? You'd get us our own ship?" Ayame asked.

*Of course. You are all my friends/family, and I wouldn't want to break up/disperse such a fine crew. Besides, if I'm not around/near, who'll keep Ayame from being such a pain/annoyance/bitch?*

Squid ducked under water just in time to avoid the flying glass of *sake*.

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Jayme Lynn Blaschke's first published story was "Project Timespan" (*Interzone* 116). He lives in Texas.

# NEVER LET THEM SEE YOU NOVA

*Paul Di Filippo*

**A**s I sat in the posh anteroom at Dreamworks SKG, waiting for the most important appointment of my entire professional life, one obsessive thought kept running through my mind like a warfarin-maddened rat: The first thing they'll hit me with is *The Foundation Trilogy*....

I knew there was absolutely no way I could skip dealing with that fiasco, the stench of which still ascended heavenward two years after the release of that mega-expensive dog. My best bet, I figured, was to get the goddamn corpse out of the way as quickly as possible. Blame the studio, the director, the cast, the special effects crew – hell, blame the grips and the gophers, if it came to that. Anyone, in short, except the infamous pariah of a scriptwriter.

Because that pariah was me, Curt Boardmender.

I had penned the scripts for a dozen fantasy classics, a handful of genuine hits, a couple of losyer echelon box-office record-holders, and all anyone could remember was the one bomb. Where was the justice in that? I asked whatever Hollywood gods were listening. Since that debacle, I hadn't been able to sell so much as a lousy treatment. Two years of living off my bank account, trying to keep up the necessary face-saving façade of success, had left me utterly tapped. The vultures at the repo agency were one step behind me and my unmuffled Jag, and the bank was ready to kick my ass out of my former dreamhouse. I almost felt like letting the weasels take the dump. The bonedry pool had a crack in it like the combined cleavage of the Arquette sisters, the lawn was a jungle since I had been forced to let the landscapers go, and the remains of the most recent mudslide were still banked against the uphill picture window. But the sheer smarmy vindictiveness of all the bastards ranked against me roused my fighting spirits. There was still plenty of piss and ingenuity left in ol' Curt Boardmender! With one little break, I'd finally show them all. The pitch I was going to make today was inspired. It couldn't fail. *It couldn't.*

"Mr Boardmender?" The sleek receptionist's sexy voice interrupted my sour memories. "The Triumvirate will see you now."

I stood up and polished my once handsome, now shabby Italian shoes on the back of my pants legs. I slicked back my selfadministered haircut and tugged at the lapels of my silk jacket. That latter move was a mistake, as I heard a seam in the shoulders pop open. Oh well, onward and upward. With confident stride and beaming tanned face (at least sunshine was still free), I marched in to meet my fate.

Behind a massive table sat three of the most powerful men in Hollywood: Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen.

Their familiar faces were expected, but not that of the fourth man with them. To my immense dismay, I saw the smirking puss of one of my peers, J. J. Martin

Michaelgeorge. Creator of such television hits as *Tigris 7* and *Bimbo and the Bugbear*, Michaelgeorge had always been a rival, and represented nothing but bad news for me. Plainly, he had been drafted today for his expertise in sciencefictional matters. His presence would make my pitch that much harder.

As I stepped forward and shook hands all around, a sudden surge of confidence boiled through me. Despite all the odds against me, I was back in the gaudy, brutal arena I knew and loved. And I was armed with an idea no one else had ever dared to conceive. That alone might be enough to guarantee my success.

After the hellos and how-are-yous – pleasant and businesslike enough – once we were all seated, the sucker-punch came. Beaming nastily through his speckled beard, Spielberg said, "Before we hear your new proposal, Curt, I just want to ask about some dialogue from your last script. I believe it came out of the mouth of Woody Harrelson as Hari Seldon. Let's see...if my memory is accurate, the line went something like, 'That fucking Mule, I'll blow his telepathic brains out his ass.' Did that come straight from Asimov's text, or was it your invention?"

Figuring I had nothing to lose, I countered with a sly offensive. "Neither, Steve. That was Woody's ad-lib. You know how these headstrong stars are with their lines. Why, I imagine something similar could have happened with Robin Williams in *Hook*, or John Belushi in *1941*."

Reference to those two turkeys settled Spielberg's hash mighty fast, and his compatriots quickly stifled their own jibes, not anxious for me to bring up any of *their* ancient duds.

"Well," the solemn Spielberg said, "maybe we should leave the past alone for now. Tell us about your new idea, Curt."

I had honed and rehearsed this high-concept soundbite for so long, it practically leaped from my lips. "One hundred billion years of a Julia Roberts universe."

They jerked to attention like puppets, and I made haste to capitalize on their greedy attention. "Two highly respected and classic science fiction novels have just entered the public domain, providing this project with an instant savings. No payment to the writer's estate is needed to secure the properties. And the first person to film these linked classics is guaranteed an instant audience-and critical esteem. I've known and loved these books for years, and have already worked up a treatment. To the best of my knowledge, no one else has any plans to make these books into a film. If we move fast, we can foreclose any other studio from so much as winking at this project. I can promise you a script within, oh, four months. Shooting could start before the year is out."

Geffen spoke up. "What are the names of these books, Curt?"

Here came the make-or-break moment. "*Last and*

*First Men* and *Star Maker*, by Olaf Stapledon.”

The executives looked blank, but Michaelgeorge brayed like the jackass he was and practically fell out of his seat. Katzenberg snapped his fingers at the scriptwriter and commanded, “Martin, what’s so funny?”

Gradually the gloating Michaelgeorge recovered his composure.

“Oh, man, I thought I had heard every lamebrained scheme under the sun, but this one takes the cake. The two books he just named were written by this eccentric British philosopher who didn’t even know real sci-fi existed! They’re totally plotless, without any individual characters as such. They’re full of way-out speculation and endless details of physics and biology and even religion! It’s as if I proposed filming —”

I cut the moron off. “Filming the *Bible*, maybe? Seemed to work for DeMille and Heston. Or maybe you had in mind Woody Allen’s *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex?* It’s not that far-fetched, believe me. No plot and no characters in the original are not bad things — it lets us impose our own smarter ideas on Stapledon’s skeleton. It’s the same recipe as any other movie, really. Big names and a kickass script. And if I provide the latter, you guys can surely attract the heavy hitters.”

“Let’s hear the man out,” said Spielberg, and I wasted no time launching into my rap.

“Okay, first of all we’re talking about just a single film. *Last and First Men* is folded into the plot of what I call *Starmaker! The Musical*. This is a story about evolution, from slime to superman, with plenty of catchy tunes. Kinda like that riff in *2001* with the apes, but bigger, bolder and more action-packed. Yet it’s not going to annoy the fundamentalists, because it has a theological angle too.

“Anyway, here’s the scenario. We open while the universe is still young, and life is simple. ‘Long ago in a galaxy far away,’ right?

“There’s a planet with some kind of cutesy alien life on it. And one of those aliens is Julia Roberts.”

Michaelgeorge snorted derisively. “Cutesy aliens? Stapledon’s books had intelligent herbs and squids, slime moulds and insect swarms. Humans the size of Danny DeVito who looked like bats, or big ones ugly as Jon Voigt mated with Andre the Giant.”

I bulled past those objections. “We ditch all of that, keep the various makeup jobs simple, of course. Wouldn’t do to hide Julia’s assets. Maybe give her a sexy tail, or high-heel hooves. You get the idea. Anyway, Julia plays this brainy scientist or philosopher type, very noble. She’s lonely, though, because she can’t find a mate worthy of her. ‘Oh, where is the alien guy worthy of my love? Alas, I fear he doesn’t yet exist.’ That pitiful lament sets up the whole movie. During the next hundred and fifty minutes, we are going on a dizzying, rollercoaster ride through all of time and space, watching the physical universe and the league of interstellar civilizations mature together, until they finally produce a mate worthy of Julia. I see an educational hook, too. Maybe we can get an endorsement from Stephen Hawking even. Anyway, this is going to be the kind of star-turn for Julia that *The Nutty Professor* was for Eddie Murphy. She’s in practically every scene, in a hundred different shapes and roles. Fighting barbarians like Xena, discovering radium like Marie

Curie, piloting spaceships like Carrie Fisher.”

I could sense they were interested, and I didn’t let up. “Of course, we need some conflict. So Julia has a rival. I see Madonna here, a bad girl type who wants to pervert the universe to produce the ultimate bad boy type for *her*. Now, these boyfriend roles will be the two male leads. I picture George Clooney as Julia’s ideal, and maybe Jeremy Irons as Madonna’s mate. They keep popping up in imperfect forms throughout the story. Each time after a steamy sex scene, Julia and Madonna say, ‘Sorry, buddy, you’re not ready yet. Back to the drawing board.’ This is the hook for the ad campaign too. We honor Stapledon by using an actual line from his book: ‘In the waste of stars, love is crucified.’ Classy, huh?”

Now Geffen interjected, “What about the musical angle?”

“We can go either of two ways. If we want some kind of Broadway sound, we hire Andrew Lloyd Webber. If we want more of a pop thing, we assemble the hottest acts available. Snoop Doggie Dogg, Puff Daddy — hell, I don’t need to tell a musical genius like you how to do your job, David.”

Geffen beamed, and I plunged on. “The great thing about this concept is that it’s totally elastic. Whatever market research and focus groups reveal the audience wants, we dump it in. They want a jungle world, they got it. They want furry teddybears or scary bugs, they got it. All that ultimately matters is bringing Julia and George together at the end.”

Katzenberg asked, “And exactly how does that happen?”

“Simple. Julia and George become the entire universe! They make the final leap into sheer godhood. It’s right there in Stapledon. I picture the camera pulling back to reveal one galaxy after another, until we realize that the galaxies are forming two luminescent naked bodies! Julia and George in the ultimate clinch!”

My shirt and jacket were soaked with sweat. I sat back in my seat without enough energy to power a pinwheel. I had delivered my best shot. Now it was up to the three movers and shakers. They put their heads together and whispered for a few minutes, while Michaelgeorge and I glared at each other. Then all three of the execs stood up like Siamese triplets and extended their hands.

“Curt,” said Spielberg, “we’re greenlighting *Starmaker!* to the tune of a quarter-billion. How’s ten percent of that sound for your share?”

Only nerves honed by years of experience allowed me to shakily stand. “Sounds like I can afford a new muffler now, Steven.”

They laughed, not realizing I was just speaking the truth. Michaelgeorge stalked off like a foiled Snidely Whiplash, and I soon had a drink in my hand and a cigar between my lips. The rest of that day was surely going to be lost in celebration, but when tomorrow dawned, I’d be busily at work, using every iota of my skills to make *Starmaker!* sing.

Hell, maybe I’d even go back and give those Stapledon books more than a quick skim.

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Paul Di Filippo’s last story here was “The Happy Valley at the End of the World” (*Interzone* 125).

## BOOKS



## REVIEWED

# Is That a Meltdown in Your Pocket, Comrade, or Are You Just Glad to See Me?

*Paul Di Filippo*

Alternate histories – uchronias, if you prefer – having exfoliated perhaps overlushly, are currently experiencing a bit of a critical backlash, akin to the downdressing cyberpunk underwent once it got allegedly too big for its britches. Dismissed as netless tennis, as fake sf, these tales of worlds differing from ours mainly by changes in “who did what when and where” are seen by many as superficially written and pandering reads, trendy and pointless.

Well, hey, Sturgeon’s Law, man. Let’s not judge the sub-genre by its worst examples, even if those constitute a majority. Uchronias have formed a long-flowing and nutrient-rich current in the Big SF Muddy since at least the early 19th century. (Check the entry in Clute and Nicholls for the hard data.) It seems unlikely that hundreds of fine authors as diverse as Dick, de Camp, Leiber, Crowley, Turtle-dove, Kornbluth, Gibson & Sterling, and Stableford would have been attracted to the mode simply by the phantasmal allure of a quick sale.

Two tests need to be applied to a uchronia to determine its worth. Not surprisingly, these are the same two tests applied to any work of sf. 1) Does the story incorporate genuine scientific speculation? and 2) Is the story aesthetically appealing and adeptly crafted?

What do we mean, though, by “genuine scientific speculation” when dealing with history? Is history even a “real” science? If so, what are its principles and theories, its basic units and forces? How is history allied to such disciplines as sociology,

anthropology and psychology? And most importantly, how are experiments conducted within the discipline?

Curiously enough, this last question brings us directly back to sf. Short of as-yet-undeveloped computer simulations of whole societies, or Hari Seldon-style Foundations, or imaginary work-table setups like that in Sturgeon’s “Microcosmic God,” uchronias represent the only kind of “thought experiment” permit-

ted to historians. It is only by imaginatively tweaking various parameters at some point in the recorded past, then running the altered world in fast-forward on paper as logically and faithfully as possible that any potential answers to a number of intriguing questions can be found. Are there strange attractors in history that force events back onto course after detours? What is the role of “the great man” versus impersonal forces such as climate and disease? How would famous historical individuals manifest their documented personalities under radically different circumstances?

Poorly done uchronias are marked by a lack of attention to such issues. Parameters are twiddled arbitrarily, and the ripples from such displacements and perturbations are inaccurately charted. “What if Maggie Thatcher had gotten divorced, and then married Elvis Costello? I bet the whole world would be ruled by Argentina and we’d all be wearing funny eyeglasses!” Spare me, please.

On the aesthetic side, all the traditional literary criteria apply. Merely to semi-plotlessly present a divergent world, hoping the reader will generously say, “Gee, what a neat idea,” is to neglect all story-telling virtues and excitements. A couple of unique yardsticks also come in handy for measuring success. Ideally, the protagonists of the altered world should resonate tellingly with their environment. In a USA dominated by extant slavery, for instance, focusing on Ralph Ellison might be a better idea than putting Tom Wolfe in the spotlight. And it would be nice to see some novelty in our uchronias, the depiction of situations rarely encountered in history, extreme instances that illuminate the mean.

If you’re still with me after this long preface, take heart. I want to bring to your attention not a failure but a fine example of alternate-history writing. This book is skewed a bit from conformity with my theoretical musings above, but only because the extrahistorical impulse toward gleefully wicked satire underlies much of it.

Any *Interzone* reader worth her Young Pioneer badges has surely been sampling the Socialist America stories of Eugene Byrne and Kim Newman as they ran in these pages. Now they have been assembled in book form as *Back in the USSA* (Ziesing Books, \$29.95, 356 pages). In their preferred order, bouncing fruitfully off each other, they deliver a wide-ranging portrait of the wild years from 1912 to 1998 on a timeline where the Second American Rev-



olution brought Communism to the land of Washington and Lincoln, and thus recast the natures and relations of the rest of the world's countries.

More specifics on the Byrne-Newman milieu than this, I do not think you want or need from me. Let it be simply understood that these authors are deeply conversant with their period – both actual and imaginary – are generous with both major and minor inventions, and layer on details so thickly that their world becomes almost as tangible as ours. Given this, what I'd like to examine are some of the issues discussed above, as exemplified in this book.

Our authors seem to adhere to both the strange attractor and great man theories. Examples of the former: If the USA isn't around to back South Vietnam, then the UK and Russia will. Even though the movie-making industry is now centred in Eastern Europe, Bond films will still get made. Russian "beetniki" rise up to stand in for their missing American cousins. The Quarrymen will come into being despite the absence of US R&B. In short, although the Byrne-Newman universe at first seems utterly changed, it ultimately exudes a homey familiarity. An initial sense of estrangement gives way to a feeling that roles have been swapped rather than reinvented. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and is one of the consequences and givens of the authors' satirical bent. Targets analogous to the ones we know must be present for satire to make its mark.

The Byrne-Newman world is also heavily indebted to pivotal individuals. Not for them the boring influences of a bad crop or El Nino. Russia goes capitalist thanks solely to a strong Tsar. The USSA is rendered corrupt and degenerate mostly through the downward-radiating influence of Chairman Al Capone. Tom Joad motivates the under-classes. This emphasis on character obviously shines better in fiction, but has its own potential defects, as discussed below.

On the whole, though, our authors play fair and square with historical imperatives, exhibiting an above-average mindfulness of how events interlink and trigger each other.

Speculative content aside, what of the sheer narrative qualities of the book? Newman and Byrne earn five red stars in this area. Their stories fly by like Tupolev racecars. Two prime motifs in this book are pop music and movies, and these art-forms are reflected in the speed of pacing, visual acuity, and sparseness of infodumps found here. Allowing readers to interpolate and piece together vital data on their own, Byrne and Newman achieve stories that quickly reach escape velocity before colourfully exploding as

planned.

The character of communistic America – for surely the nation is the primary character here – is well done and authentic, and illustrates by what slim odds the USA endured this century in her present form. America's brand of communism is uniquely hers, influenced by all that has gone before, and not just a stale rehash of the USSR's. I would cite as a possible flaw the fact that two of the major sections ("Teddy Bears' Picnic" and "Abdication Street") abandon the USSA to zero in on other regions – were these two segments not so vigorous and reflective of every theme in the book.

*Back in the USSA* is larded with figures famous in our own continuum: almost a whole page of small type lists their names, allowing readers to play the fun game of "spot the celebrity." On the one hand, using "real" personalities has several advantages. Culturally online readers instantly have an empathetic fix on the actors, saving lots of writerly buildup. Also, ironic fates can be imposed: Hitchcock runs a restaurant with a high mortality rate among its diners. Solzhenitsyn is a standup comedian. Ed Gein is a

butcher to the commissars. But such a cast also runs the risk of sounding like the table of contents of an issue of *Entertainment Weekly*. In this era where celebrity sometimes seems the only measure of worth, should fiction buy into such a system? It's interesting to compare this book to, say, Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), and its cast of fictitious average joes. Exactly when did uchronias come to revolve so exclusively about the famous?

But although Byrne and Newman steer perilously close at times to over-reliance on name-dropping, they redeem themselves at book's end by a final focus on the imaginary reporter Lowe (first encountered in the book's opener), who replicates something like the Sex Pistols' final flameout tour across a post-communist America, where famous "fictional" characters (Gordon Gekko) engage the "real" ones (Robert Maxwell) in scenes that might have come from Ballard's *Hello America* (1981).

With this book, Kim Newman and Eugene Byrne expose themselves as the Peter Cook and Dudley Moore of Foggy Bottom Kremlinology.

**Paul Di Filippo**

Kim Newman (left) and Eugene Byrne strike the pose from their book jacket (inset) at Maxim Jakubowski's *Murder One* during the London launch of *Back in the USSA* (here, however, the designer prefers Byrne's face to Newman's crooked arm). This designer has to wonder why no reviewer has mentioned the delicious irony that subsists in the original of the paraphrase title, the Beatles song "Back in the USSR", itself a parody of Chuck Berry's classic "Back in the USA".



In atonement for sins doubtless committed in some earlier life (surely, no one can be that wicked at 21!) I once worked for some 18 months in a large department store. That hardly ranks me with a prison-camp survivor, but such experiences mark a man; to this day I cannot enjoy *Are You Being Served?* without a shudder. Thus James Lovegrove's *Days* (Phoenix, £6.99), which is set in a "gigastore" of grandiose monstrosity, has an especial resonance for me; but I believe even those who lack that background will find, at one level or another, much to admire.

Lovegrove's previous novel, *The Hope*, was also set in a construct of supreme vanity and folly, but it was very much more of an allegory and less of a satire than *Days*. The construction and launching of the good ship *Hope* was, by any rational standard, an insane undertaking, while *Days* gigastore, monument to hubris, avarice and vacuity though it be, is thinkable in terms of rational commercial endeavour. In fact, it would probably be more fruitful to read *Days* in conjunction with Ballard's *High-Rise*; there's the same tight control over the progression, and the same congruence of manner and matter, but a far greater emotional depth. While *High-Rise* is about people who voluntarily reject humane values and sensitivities, *Days* is about people who strive, however inadequately, to sustain them in the face of the ceaseless assault which *Days*, by its very existence, mounts. Their symbology may be impoverished, their channels of communication diverted, their responses maimed; but, no less than the complement of *Hope*, they struggle ceaselessly to preserve such humanity as they retain. Indeed, odd though many of them are, it might be objected that the comparative normality of most characters implies an unduly sanguine view of the human spirit.

Moreover, good though *The Hope*'s command of detail was, the observation was never like this. The logo of *Days* gigastore is a circle, vertically bisected between black and white, on a field of dollar green; Lovegrove constantly enriches his already stylized narrative with yet further contexts where the logo may appear. It's counterpointed with the equally insistent recurrence of the number seven: all the chapter epigraphs (which smell somewhat of the lamp and even more strongly of Brewer) feature that number, which has obviously served to stimulate Lovegrove's imagination and at times to impel the plot.

The story is tightly focused, being an account of one day in the life of the store, seen principally through the eyes of Frank Hubble, a "Ghost" (i.e. store detective) and Linda Trivett, a naïve young housewife who has just qualified for a Silver (lowest

grade but one) storecard and been unwise enough to lug Gordon, her husband, along on her first expedition. We also share the viewpoints of some of the seven sons of Septimus Day, the founder, who are now the owner-directors of the company, and Miss Dalloway, deranged manager of the Books department, plus some of her besotted assistant "Bookworms." With beautiful symmetry, at the climactic moment a fleeing Bookworm causes Hubble to injure Gordon *en passant*; he shoots the Bookworm, and is injured by Linda in vengeance.

Considered purely as a satire, *Days* is not very specific. The obvious targets are sundry of the more obvious human deficiencies, notably materialism, obsession, hierarchical thinking and cultivated insensitivity; well enough, but not very original – Lovegrove scores best by making all his major characters believable. I found myself agreeing that, yes, given the stresses imposed by the mere existence of *Days*, that is how they would react, even though my own view is that certain of the incidents described, notably the feeding frenzies which take place when a department holds a "lightning sale," are well over the top. Lovegrove compels such belief by a combination of detailed visual imagination, meticulous concern for the language and the wit to harness the two constructively. The result is some unusually fine ornamentation, the conversation between a salesman and potential buyer of collectable matchbooks being a model of how such things should be done.

Altogether, this is a novel of exceptional brilliance. Had its production occupied Lovegrove's every waking moment (as well as all his dreams) since he finished *The Hope*, the time could not have been better spent.

And finally (if only to prove that I read it with attention as well as admiration), I'll just point out that there are only four Cardinal Virtues (the other three are Theological); that Ng is not a Korean name, but Fukien Chinese; and that the site of *Days* would cover not seven million,

but 700 hectares – the difference between a good size English farm and a small but respectable country; *age quod agis*, James, which is blessing enough.

## Exceptional Brilliance

Chris Gilmore

Sheri S. Tepper's latest offering, *The Family Tree* (Voyager, £11.50) is stylishly written and full of sparkle and bounce, but rather difficult to get into, even so. That is because as well as being written from a large number of viewpoints and requiring the reader to learn a lot of new words, it gives the impression of two very dissimilar and quite unrelated novels written in tandem.

One is a contemporary, third-person police-procedural-with-human-interest and concerns the efforts of Detective Sergeant Dora Henry to discover why someone is murdering distinguished industrial geneticists, always with the same weapon and never leaving any clues. She is also, at the age of 35, trying to find some sort of balance between the traumas of her childhood in a *ménage* reminiscent of Claudia FitzHerbert's (though with less money and style), and the thoroughly unsatisfactory *mariage blanc* which, by way of reaction, she subsequently contracted with an extreme anal-retentive control freak.

The other is told mainly from the first-person viewpoint of Nassifer, teenage slave about 3,000 years hence in a post-débâcle sultanate which bears a strong resemblance to many sword-and-sorcery milieux, but also in third person from those of sundry folk whom she meets on her travels, she being in the retinue of Prince Sahir, who is on a Quest.

Aside from the differences of genre, subject-matter and construction, the two stories have contrasting moods: Dora's is evidently intended to be, at least on one level, a sober psychological study of the effects of a dysfunctional childhood on a woman's self-esteem, while Nassifer's world includes, *inter alia*, an imperial province called Fan-Kyu Cyndly, which hardly inspires a serious approach.

Such unity as the book has is supplied by the fantasy element, which consists principally of new species of preternaturally fast-growing and apparently intelligent trees which invade the US, starting with Dora's home town. By Nassifer's time the new trees have achieved a *modus vivendi* with people, but something, which may possibly be connected with Prince Sahir's Quest, is "stirring them up." Even so, the first intimation only appears after p.100, and the point of the book doesn't become apparent until p.238, when it's disclosed as an exceedingly complex and fanciful joke. I won't reveal its point here, but as I've only encountered it once before, long ago in a story by Eric Frank Russell, it should be new

to most readers.

Thereafter the book takes on yet a third persona, more reminiscent of Wilmar Shiras's *Children of the Atom* than anything else, and culminating in a psychological absurdity as gross as I've ever met, when Tepper attempts to tie up at least some of her innumerable loose ends. Despite the vivacity of the various parts, as a whole this book is a mess. I should add that it's a mess with an extremely explicit moral which will not appeal to everyone. Sheri Tepper is a proponent of eugenics, in a fairly strong version, and her message is that unless we start applying eugenic controls to our own breeding the human race may well be doomed. Her model isn't racist, but will probably raise some hackles, even so. Me, I'm easy; I take her point to a limited extent, but favour a more central position in the nature/nurture debate.

Self-published books tend to be either like others of their genre (only less good) or distinctly odd. Martin Wagner's *Rachel's Machine* (Pinter & Martin, £5.99) inclines more to the odd, presenting an unlikely combination of surreal horror set against a social-realistic account of teenage despair. Set in a dreary industrial small town in Pennsylvania, it concerns the life and hard times of Rachel Connor, who is 17, beautiful and doing not too badly at school, where she is going steady with Scott, the best-looking boy. On the debit side her parents are poor, her home life is an emotional void and her sexual experience is so comprehensive and so dull that she can barely sustain interest in it. Never have I seen such frequent or such affectless use of the word fuck. Her horizons offer no ambition beyond the ownership of a VW Beetle, and to that end she takes a part-time machine-tending job in a button factory – which is where her troubles really, but not immediately, begin.

There are sundry intimations that the world, and especially her home and the factory, are not all that they seem, but as the principal manifestation is that she develops an increasing affinity with all things electro-mechanical, she is not much discommoded. Definitely on the plus side, she is able to buy her Beetle and acquires a boyfriend who is, whatever his other failings, different from the handsome but superficial Scott. Just how different becomes apparent in the last third of the book, as the lines are drawn for a conflict waged simultaneously on the physical and metaphysical planes, Rachel's body and soul being both the battleground and the prize.

Wagner certainly combines disparate modes a lot better than Tepper, but the book's pace is poorly controlled, with too little going on in the first half, and too many new elements introduced in the second. Moreover, the ending is weak; for all Rachel's sorrow and suffering, there's no sense that anything much has been resolved either way – inevitably, as the motivation behind the Evil Force never comes into crisp enough focus. I can therefore only recommend this one to people of a certain age who may be experiencing some sort of mid-life crisis. Alas! Sweet bird of youth, whither art thou flown? If it's into Rachel's milieu, Bye-bye, Blackbird, and I'm not waiting up.

When someone with a name like Susan Schwartz gives her book a title like *Cross and Crescent* (Tor, \$23.95), one feels that the content ought to involve curses on both those houses. There have been few enough good times and places to be Jewish these last two millennia, and Byzantium in the period of the First Crusade wasn't among them. In fact what we have here is a heavily researched historical romance, whose fantasy elements become more insistent as it advances, but in which Islam appears merely as an impersonal enemy – there are no Muslim characters. It's written partly from the viewpoint of Anna Commena (1083-1148), daughter of the Emperor Alexius Comnenus and writer of *The Alexiad*, a long panegyric on her father, now read more as an historical source than for pleasure. The rest is mainly from that of

Leo Ducas, cousin to the emperor, and the two children of very doubtful parentage (being the offspring of a chthonic demiurge) whom he and his Jewish wife have adopted: Theodoulos, by now a middle-aged man of Greek Orthodox persuasion, and Binah, his sister, who is far more magically powerful and thus less human than he.

The scope for internal conflict is obvious, and exacerbated by the presence of Bohemond's Frankish crusaders, whose manners and customs the sophisticated and humane "Romans" of Byzantium often find less sympathetic than those of cultivated Arabs or even the Turkish invaders of Asia Minor. Well enough, but this is Alfred Duggan territory, which means Schwartz has to climb the additional mountain of direct comparison with an exceptional writer who was also an excellent historian. Without duplicating her research I'm unable to comment on the book's authenticity; no doubt some of the minor characters are mentioned in the record, others not. I spotted no anachronisms and only one error (relating to Anna's age at death), though some of the details, especially those relating to the Tafurs (a cult of psychotic Christian berserkers dedicated to death and squalor) strike me as improbable.

But her principal failing is a perverse insistence on not only plunging *in medias res* with the first chapter, but doing the same with virtually every succeeding scene, leaving the reader to sort out the linking passages for himself. It's not impossible, but it's always wearying and often undermines the narrative, as when Bohemond, being desperately short of food and having captured a large number of spies and suspected spies, decides not only to kill them in cold blood but to cook and eat them. Among them Theodoulos is horrified to recognize an old friend.

A good strong situation, but vitiated because this is the very first mention of any spies at all, let alone that individual. On a lower level, constantly having to infer what has happened since the character was last on stage diverts attention from what is happening to him/her in the current episode, with a consequent loss of focus, especially in the early chapters. Once I had got used to it, and come to know the characters (who are interesting and well drawn) it was easier to cope with. I recommend it to enthusiasts for the period, but those who are not acquainted with Duggan should read him first, in particular *Knight with Armour* and *Lord Geoffrey's Fancy*.

Chris Gilmore



james lovegrove

Scanning the programme of events while nursing a coffee on the Sunday morning of last year's World Fantasy Convention in London, I noticed a panel discussion which promised some life at that most inhospitable of hours. I don't recall exactly what the panel was about but the real attraction was that it was chaired by Graham Joyce and it featured the inimitable Joe Lansdale.

Anything involving Joyce is invariably entertaining and anything at which Lansdale gets to talk is a sure-fire tonic for the morning-after blues. And feeling a little jaded myself and in need of a pick-me-up, I decided to give it a try. Sure enough, the Chairman fulfilled his role immediately by hoisting all the panellists' chairs off the platform and placing them down in the midst of the modest-sized – it was *tiny!* – audience, from where he then proceeded to lead the discussion.

It didn't take long for somebody to broach the subject of self-censorship. One writer of renown, it was alleged (the "accused" was not present), was on record as saying that he had felt unable to place too much emphasis on certain things (namely sex and violence) in his work until such time as his mother had died. Only then would he feel, the tale goes, that he was not in danger of causing either embarrassment or shock.

"Hell," Jolting Joe chirped up in that grass-chawing Texas accent of his, "when I write, I write like everybody I *know* is dead!"

Of course, it received the appropriate raucous applause. But, humour aside, Lansdale has never made a truer statement. And his latest book – *The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent* (Subterranean Press, \$40) – is a joyous testament to that fact.

Writing simply for one's one self is something to which many writers aspire. It's the thing that surely motivates them all to get into the game in the first place... After all, if wealth is the primary objective then they would be better advised to become lawyers, accountants or even – particularly in today's writing climate – supermarket shelf-stackers. Of course, for a select few, wealth and fame do occasionally follow and the bookshelves – particularly those containing the horror, sf and fantasy genres – are littered with examples of writers forgetting why they started out and simply re-hashing the last bestseller.

Not so Joe Lansdale.

Lansdale has always written for *his ownself* and here he shares some of those early literary ventures ... including several that never even got sold. But this is far more than a book of clumsy and mildewed trunk stories. What it *is* is an excellent "How to..." book, complete with introductory essays to each story detailing what

# Warts and All

Peter Crowther

was on his mind at the time of producing the tale. (And, typical of the man himself, the essays are always at least as entertaining as the story which follows them... occasionally even better.)

Monsters abound – some of which are not even human – along with motorcycles, Nazis, hoodoo, voodoo, killers (serial, sexual and every other conceivable type) and those seemingly frail and aimless skirt-ends of humanity who populate the small towns and communities that hide in the tip of Society's shadow.

The closing piece, a slim but powerful two-pager entitled "One Death, Two Episodes," brings the whole project to a natural close. According to Lansdale, the tale – written during the gestation of a novel (*The Nightrunners*) as a means of getting into the types of character he wanted to depict – was a turning point in his fiction. One can see why. It's as unpleasant a glimpse into the collective mind of bigotry, irrational violence and casual disregard for humanity as anything gone before. Like the unfortunate Negro in Erskine Caldwell's classic "Saturday Afternoon" (from Caldwell's 1959 collection, *American Earth*), the "crime" of the recipient of Lansdale's characters' brutality is, again, simply that he has been born the wrong colour.

*The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent* is a beautifully produced, fine and fascinating piece of work... warts and all. But, maybe, particularly the warts.

On those cloudy days, Robert Neville was never sure when sunset came, and sometimes they were in the streets before he could get back.

So begins Richard Matheson's timeless vampire novel, *I Am Legend*. It concludes some 160 pages later in a quietly apocalyptic finale that ... but, for those who still have the great adventure still ahead of them, that would be telling too much.

I suppose I must have been around 13 or 14 when I first read *I Am Legend* and, despite many excellent novels over the intervening three-plus decades, the story of the last man on Earth's campaign to rid the world of vampires

still stands out in my mind as one of my Desert Island books (the tally currently stands in the mid-60s, so I need to do a little judicious pruning).

The good news is that the novel is again available in *two* very attractive editions. The best value has got to be the trade paperback from Tor's Orb imprint, priced at only \$12.95 and including, in addition to the novel, 10 excellent short stories (another 150 pages) which run the usual gamut of Matheson's fractured worldview – exemplified in the old *Twilight Zone* TV show – culminating in a disturbing story about a man who hears the constant ringing of a telephone. Surely a compulsory purchase for those who don't know the book.

The other edition is something else again... and equally compulsory if you have \$65 to spare. As part of its commendable *Classics Revisited* series, Gauntlet Publications has produced a special 40th Anniversary Edition of *I Am Legend*, with signatures included from Matheson himself and George Clayton Johnson (Intro #1), Dan Simmons (Intro #2) and Dennis Etchison (Afterword) – there's a third Intro from Matthew R. Bradley, although Bradley has not signed the sheet.

As a companion to *I Am Legend*, Gauntlet has also released an Anniversary Edition (this time, the 25th) of another Matheson classic ... the often overlooked "haunted house" saga, *Hell House*. Along with another Intro (again unsigned) from Matthew Bradley, the book features an Introduction from Dean Koontz and an Afterword from Matheson's son, Richard Christian Matheson, in the form of a letter sent to publisher Barry Hoffman explaining why he felt unable to agree to Hoffman's request that he pen an Afterword!

*Hell House* concerns the attempts of a group of investigators trained in psychic phenomena to ascertain the existence of life after death by spending time in the Belasco mansion, reputed to be the Mount Everest of haunted houses. Regularly – and, in my view, unfairly – compared unfavourably with Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, Matheson's book is a genuinely unsettling and frequently out-and-out terrifying account of paranormal investigation, citing documented experiences from around the world and building on Jackson's more gentle style without stooping to the "excess all areas" approach adopted by so much of the standard stalk-and-slash fare we're used to in the cinema.

Of course, the responsibility (blame or kudos, depending on your particular stance) of those excesses may be laid firmly at the doors of two authors and, more specifically, their most famous novels: namely Robert Bloch's *Psycho*

and William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*, both of which have new Gauntlet editions – produced to tie in with the 35th anniversary of the initial publication of *Psycho* and the 25th of *The Exorcist*.

As Ray Bradbury says in his Afterword to Bloch's masterpiece, "I admired and was fascinated by *Psycho*, but I also trembled with apprehension about what it might mean to cinematographers, writers, and phantom-hunchback studio directors out of control." Such concerns, we now know, were not misplaced.

Despite its slim size (just 150 pages), *Psycho* is a powerhouse of a read – even now, in these years of lurid gross-outs – and the Gauntlet edition (signed by Richard Matheson, who writes the Introduction, and Bloch himself) is a worthy addition to anyone's bookshelves.

Also available in Gauntlet's "classics revisited" series are the following:

The 45th Anniversary Edition of Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*, signed by Bradbury, William F. Nolan (Introduction) and Ed Gorman (Afterword);

The 40th Anniversary Edition of Ray Bradbury's *The October Country*, signed by Bradbury, Dennis Etchison (Introduction – an exceptional and illuminating piece resulting from a conversation with Bradbury about the book) and Robert McCammon (Afterword);

The 15th Anniversary Edition of Peter Straub's *Shadowland*, signed by Straub, Ramsey Campbell (Foreword) and Thomas Tessier (Afterword).

All of these novels and collections are indispensable and the Gauntlet editions – if you can afford them: they're \$65 apiece – are beautiful, slipcased books for the serious collector. You can probably find copies at specialist bookshops or through a specialist dealer. They can also be ordered direct from Gauntlet Publications at 309 Powell Road, Springfield, PA 19064, USA – tel: 001 610 328 5476 and fax: 001 610 328 9949. But remember to add postage – \$8 per book for UK.

Imagine having an ailment that meant never being able to tolerate the daylight. This is the condition – called *xeroderma pigmentosum* – in which Chris Snow, the vampire-like protagonist of Dean Koontz's new book, *Fear Nothing* (Headline, £16.99), finds himself... though it soon transpires that he is victim rather than predator.

The book begins with 28-year-old Snow – the local author and, primarily because of his condition, something of a celebrity in the small town of Moonlight Bay – being called to the hospital where his father lies dying. He braves the daytime streets encased in layers of clothing and pro-

tective face-wear and rushes to the hospital to make his last farewell to his father. However, the ordeal takes its toll and no sooner has his father been taken from the room to the waiting hearse than Snow suddenly remembers the photograph that his father asked to be cremated along with him: a favourite photograph of Snow's mother.

Concerned that his father's body will be taken before he can retrieve the situation, Snow hurries downstairs to the indoor garage where he overhears a conversation between two orderlies from the crematorium. It is this conversation that is not only to change Chris Snow's life but also, eventually, the lives of pretty much everyone else in Moonlight Bay... and perhaps even the world.

But despite this rather intriguing sound-bite, *Fear Nothing's* undeniably eloquent and gentle first-person narrative makes, at least for me, for a strangely unsatisfactory and maddening book. Its premise is a classic government screw-up of such colossal size and potential impact that the effects may well change the entire world and possibly even the future of mankind itself. So, no problems there... although, so soon after Koontz's previous conspiracy-theory outing, *Soul Survivor*, this comes on as being a little "been there, done that" (particularly as both books seem to have an almost new-age subplot of, if not *religious* then at least quasi-mystical undertones).

But, despite some nice set-pieces, the story does stretch the bounds of credibility, with a bizarre sequence of events taking place around the hapless Snow and his trusty canine companion, Orson – and mostly during one evening, taking those readers who manage to stay the course up to page 336 – as the pair trudge, cycle and plain run for their lives around the immediate locale, taking in one wacky character after another... from a philosophical beach bum all the way through a psychotic police chief and on to a local Down's Syndrome-affected teenager who happens to be a genius glass-blower.

On the way, we learn a lot about *xeroderma pigmentosum*, surfing, rhesus monkeys and animal intelligence and communication in general, and about being a DeeJay on US small-town radio, and glass-blowing but precious little – at least until the final few pages – about what's been happening in the town.

In the hands of a writer less talented than Koontz, this could well have been the turkey of the year – particularly coming, as it did, so close to Christmas. As it is – and even though it isn't too much of a hardship to persevere and finish the book – there's a distinct feel of there being rather too much stuffing for its own good.

Pete Crowther

## The Advantages of Amateurism

Brian Stableford

The days seem to have passed when the standard strategy for obtaining tenure in the literature department of an American university was to obtain a contract from Twayne to add one more item to their interminable list of monographs on forgotten American authors. Their passing has less to do with the exhaustion of the supply than changes in the way publications are weighted when tenure applications are processed; such changes inevitably result in drastic overnight changes to the nature and form – but not, of course, the dismal quality – of routine academic hackwork, which is now every bit as formulaic as run-of-the-mill pulp fiction. As universities all over the world have become thoroughly professionalized, academic scholarship has inevitably become a business: a bureaucratized series of performances which has nothing at all to do with curiosity, discovery or the love of knowledge.

Rumour has it that real scholars can still get jobs, always provided that they keep their inclinations under a very tight rein and agree to interest themselves only in fashionable matters. Fortunately, the world is a kinder place than it might be, and it is still just about possible for real scholars who cannot or will not make such compromises to find enough to eat. The luckier ones even contrive to find publishers bold enough to put their work into print in spite of the fact that they do not have the safety net of automatic orders from university libraries. Such publishers are, of course, diehard amateurs themselves, devotedly operating small presses with the same obsessive disregard for conventional economic reason that is deep-ingrained in all authentic scholars.

I often wish that I had that kind of dedication myself, but I am cursed with an irredeemably superficiality which spreads my efforts far too thin.





Jessica Amanda Salmonson, the editor of *The Rose of Death and Other Mysterious Delusions* (Ash-Tree Press, P.O. Box 1360, Ashcroft, British Columbia, V0K 1A0, Canada) is the genuine article. This collection of stories by Julian Hawthorne – the unjustly neglected son of the more famous Nathaniel – follows her monumental collection of tales by Vincent O'Sullivan and is every bit as good. Her introduction is a masterpiece, combining a meticulously detailed account of Hawthorne's life and career with a painstaking analysis of his work based in the most intimate acquaintance – an acquaintance which, as she dutifully observes, is loving as well as thoroughly informed. Rarely can so much intellectual labour – much of it extremely difficult to do, given the near-impossibility of bringing together the relevant resources – have been condensed into so few pages to such excellent effect.

The stories chosen for this first collection – more are apparently planned, and Hawthorne certainly left sufficient work of good quality to fill at least another two – are selected with great care, and it is to be hoped that they will succeed in renewing interest in a fascinating writer. They do include a couple likely to be familiar to genre aficionados – the vampire

story "Ken's Mystery" has been widely reprinted and the *femme fatale* story "The Delusion of Ralph Penwyn" was included in one of the paperback collections which Sam Moskowitz ghost-edited for Alden Norton – but these could hardly have been excluded given that they are so obviously among the author's best. The deftly creepy "The Mysterious Case of My Friend Browne," the neatly intense "The Rose of Death" and the sublimely exotic "The New Endymion" are, however, just as fine and almost entirely unknown. Even I had never come across "Dr Pechal's Theory" or "The Spirit of the Dance," in spite of the fact that I had made every attempt to research Hawthorne's works thoroughly for the various articles on his work I have contributed to reference books, and I am very grateful to have them. It is arguable that the longest story, "Kildhurn's Oak," is also the least, but its rather slapdash account of the unwinding of a family curse is compensated by some magnificently melodramatic passages and it is closer in theme to the stories around it than Archibald Malmaison would have been. Its selection contributes to a unity of concern – neatly summed up in the collection's subtitle – which was well worth aiming for.

Another advantage which this book has over the routine productions of academic paper-mills is the quality of its production. Ash-Tree Press is run by Barbara and Christopher Roden, who obviously care about the physical quality of books as well as their contents, and their reprints of classic ghost story collections by such writers as E. G. Swain, Amyas Northcote and M. P. Dare are nicer than the originals and conspicuously nicer than the xeroographed reprints of obscure collections pumped out in profusion by Book for Libraries Press and its analogues. According to the count provided in the advertisement pages this is the Rodens' 21st book and although they are continuing to make measured progress within their chosen niche (the same pages announce plans for collections by Richard Marsh and Robert W. Chambers) the Hawthorne book might be testimony to their intention to broaden their scope. Everyone interested in classic ghost stories ought to be interested in their efforts, and if they do not fall victim to the vicious economic riptides which have claimed so many other small presses the contribution they make to the preservation and further appreciation of the genre may well be crucial.

Brian Stableford

The trouble with going to Australia for the first two weeks of the year is you might miss new programmes on TV and you don't get any reading done. The unutterable strangeness of Australia – the people drive on the left, but overtake on the left too; the sun, the moon and the stars are all upside down and move across the sky the wrong way; the Kookaburra is outstranged by the unearthly swallowing cry of the Butcher Bird; and despite the constant sunshine everyone stays indoors – militates against reading fantastic fiction: one set of alien-ness is more than enough to cope with. So, no reading, but I did see the most outstanding US TV tosh.

One show concerns a vampire who has changed sides and become a cop. Always taking night shifts, he has a specially converted Cadillac in the boot of which he can be driven around by his partner who doesn't know he's a vampire but does suspect that something odd is going on. This was so ridiculous I forgot to write its name down, although I expect you're all shouting it at me by now.

The other was the TV spin-off series of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The central premise – of a high-school girl assuming the mantle of Slayer of the hidden masses of Vampires that never cease to threaten the kids in her school – is loopy beyond belief, but the programme does have a kind of winsome charm, engendered no doubt by the way Buffy's elfin little-girl-lost good looks com-

## The Media and Mark Morris

Paul Brazier

bine and contrast with her awesome killing ability and her burgeoning adolescent sexuality. One to watch with a cold beer and an empty head.

Back in England, the VCRs had recorded nearly everything they were supposed to, so I can report that the new series of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (Sky One, Mondays 8 pm) continues to improve on the original, although bonding Worff and Dax smacks of the endless permutations of partners that most soap operas sooner or later descend to. The only VCR failure was that the final ten minutes of part two of the initial two-parter was missing, so I still don't know how (or indeed if) Dr Bashir was exposed as a changeling! Did anyone else tape it?

*Third Rock from the Sun* (Sky One, Sundays 7.30 pm) is evolving interestingly: again beginning a new series – the third – with a two-parter, Roseanne Barr is introduced as Dick's new wife, sent by the Big Giant Head to keep him in line. John

Lithgow is beginning to be annoyingly shrill, but the surrounding cast of grotesques and lampoons is still one of the most delightful ever assembled for TV. The aliens no longer observe us; what they do is emulate human naked self-interest, but forget to practice the dissimulation we all shroud it in. It is noticeable from the opening credits that the central five stars – all putative aliens – are now accompanied by other characters who are supposed to be human – but increasingly all the characters behave as bizarrely as the aliens. This, along with Lithgow's Cleese-like mania wearing thin may be a sign that the show is losing its edge; or that it is evolving into something even more sublime. Whatever, there are certainly fewer belly laughs nowadays.

Interestingly, it was watching the credits of *Third Rock* that I first noticed that the role is no longer identified with the actor; we are supposed to know who plays whom. But actually, apart from one or two, I haven't got a clue which of the new names in the credits goes with which role. And the same goes in spades for *Earth: Final Conflict* (Sky One, Sundays 8 pm). This major new series features (in order of appearance of name on screen) Kevin Kilner, Lisa Howard, Von Flores, David Hemblen, Richard Chevolleau, and Leni Parker – but other than the likelihood that the first two named are the stars of the show, I can't put

names to actors at all.

However, while I was prepared to sneer at Majel Roddenberry's cashing in on her dead husband's ideas, I was surprised to find *Earth: Final Conflict* captivating. The scenario is simple: the aliens, Taylons (probably spelt "Talons") have arrived. They call themselves Companions, and are dedicated, apparently, to bringing peace on Earth. But there is a faction on Earth – a quasi-resistance – that believes the Companions have a hidden agenda. The first episode details an apparent assassination and the consequent involvement of William Boone. Boone is a plain policeman who the Companions decide will be their chief of security. He declines the offer on the grounds that he is married and wants to start a family. His wife is promptly murdered, clearing the way for him to work for the aliens, but he still resists. He is contacted by the politician who was apparently assassinated who explains that the Taylons are believed to be in fact ruthless invaders masquerading as peace-and-love avatars in order to lull the population into unsuspecting acceptance – to what end is not yet clear. The politician has arranged his own assassination so he can go underground and better direct the resistance.

As a result, Boone is recruited to the resistance and to the security team of the Companions at the same time. But the Taylons are *aliens*: no-one actually understands them, and the resistance may simply be red-neck paranoia; the Companions *seem* very nice, but then they would. Having no life of his own left, Boone launches himself into this surrogate world of queasy uncertainty with all the focus the Taylons could demand, thus opening the door to a series of police procedural dramas with the added spice that the aliens might be implicated at any point.

For some time now I have believed that TV has run on the rocks of originality in pure sf; the best special effects are achieved via the written word, and this is why science fiction magazines are the only thriving dedicated fiction magazines. TV has stolen the other short story markets completely. But this one area that TV *should* dominate completely given the superb special effects illusions available, resists annexation precisely because TV can never better what a truly imaginative person can imagine for themselves. In order to address this problem, TV has harnessed the special effects it *can* produce to the thing it excels at which is

personal interaction (as evidenced by proliferation of soap operas). Thus the recent proliferation of fantastic shows like *Buffy* and the silly police-vampire, and equally tawdry efforts such as *Alien Nation* and the amazingly inept *Space Precinct*. The message is clear: straight sf is too difficult, so go for something we *can* do, with sf trappings.

Majel Barrett Roddenberry should be proud of her efforts in this genre for, despite the desperately silly name and the alarming woodenness of its central characters, *Earth: Final Conflict* is in many ways a magisterial effort. The complexity of the story lines (and I noted D.C. Fontana's byline with satisfaction here) and the ravishing photography (every episode looks like a major feature film) show that this project is being taken seriously. Moreover, the investigation of the aliens is advanced with each episode, but never to a conclusive degree. So far, this series is a surprising success. I hope it continues to be so.

Companion to my hypothesis that Csf works best in prose is that real horror likewise works better directly in the mind than it can projected on any screen. Media horror seems to me to work by shock rather than real horror, and as such I avoid it; I can't stand shocks.

Written horror, on the other hand is capable of sublime effects that are all too rarely achieved nowadays. Writers have largely resorted to the easy shocks of blood and gore – what I fondly term the abattoir aspect – that are far more easily achieved in the media. It is the psyche and the character that can engender the real horror, and this is by far best placed in books.

This dichotomy appeared in Mark Morris's first book, *Toady*. Between genuine moments of pure horror are some moments of almost comic abattoir, and the joins are uneasy, as if he had introduced the gore at the request of the editor after the story was finished. His two most recent novels, *Longbarrow* (Piatkus, £16.99) and *Mr Bad Face* (Piatkus £5.99) exemplify a similar division. In *Mr Bad Face* there is little actual graphic nastiness; instead we have a story that is fundamentally a police procedural – an investigation of a serial killer with fantastic overtones, in that the killer dresses up as a monster. I am not qualified to comment on this book as a police/serial killer story, as I would not normally want to read either kind. But again Mark Morris's skill shows through, and I was interested in spite of myself in the people here. (I have to say that he does cheat outrageously in that at one point what we are reading is something the killer wrote rather than part of Morris's narra-

tive, this is only revealed at the very end, and it actively prevents the reader from guessing the ending – but even Shakespeare cheated at times, so I can't really complain.)

Conversely, in *Longbarrow*, Morris has obviously been sent back to his bench and told to write a supernatural horror story. And this is as lurid and gruesome as anyone could desire. From a pretty country cottage near an idyllic village in the English countryside we are transported fairly readily to the same location but piled high with corpses as ancient wizards reconvene to visit their curse on the place. But despite the astonishingly vile and varied tortures he conjures for the human body, the most abiding and horrific images are mundane: of the man who pees in the lavatory but doesn't pull the chain; and of the boy who, scared out of his wits and running away, misses his step and smashes his pelvis – and lies, still just alive, all night in the churchyard. Now that is horrific. And, again, Morris cannot be completely black. There is a charming love story to counterpoint the horror, and finally a worthy redemption. The book feels like a parody of the tripe he has been instructed to write, with the real caring feeling insightful story that he wanted to write embedded in it. I feel sorry for Mark Morris and other fine writers nowadays that they have to be such slaves to the market.

It was interesting, therefore, to pick up *The Bodysnatchers* (BBC £4.99), Morris's foray into the Dr Who shared universe. Here we have the Doctor arriving in a Victorian London and some lasciviously visceral descriptions of grave robbing to feed a Skarasen, a Zygon monster. And Morris seems to be in his element. The influence of science fiction on the story – that it has to make some kind of sense, even if it is only in a Doctorish sort of way – seems to give the writing more shape, just as the police procedural shaped *Mr Bad Face*. The invention here is quite awesome, and it is only let down, as are so many of these stories recently, by the intrusion of the Doctor. This book was a lot of fun to read, gruesome bits and all, and it would be delightful to see Mark Morris attempt real sf some time soon.

Paul Brazier



# BOOKS RECEIVED



DECEMBER  
1997

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anthony, Piers, and Clifford A. Pickover. **Spider Legs**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86465-5, 301pp, hardcover, cover by Latif Kazbekov, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; about an invasion of creepy-crawlies from under the sea, this began life as a novel by science-writer Pickover which Anthony then reworked; there are separate explanatory afterwords by the two authors.) 8th January 1998.

Augusta, Maria, and Antonio de Macedo, eds. **Side-Effects**. "A Collection of SF & F Short Stories." Preface by Luis Felipe Silva. Simetria [Bloco UV-2.0 Piso, Porta 11 Outeiro da Vela, 2750 Cascais, Portugal], ISBN 972-97495-0-7, 136pp + 144pp, trade paperback, cover by Joao Cesario, no price shown. (Sf anthology, first edition; published to coincide with the second sf conference held in Portugal, "On the Edge of the Empire: 2nd Encounters of Science Fiction & the Fantastic," it contains an original story by Joe Haldeman plus eight stories by Portuguese-based authors [one of whom is actually an

Englishman, David Alan Prescott], here presented in both Portuguese and English, *dos à dos*; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 128.) *Late entry: September publication, received in December 1997.*

Benford, Gregory. **Cosm. Orbit**, ISBN 1-85723-627-0, 344pp, hardcover, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; proof copy received; a hard-sf thriller, it's being touted as Benford's most ambitious fictionalization of the methodology of science since *Timescape* [1980].) 2nd April 1998.

Benford, Gregory, and Gordon Eklund. **If the Stars Are Gods**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-37066-7, 215pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf fix-up novel, first published in the USA, 1977; a medium-old work which is now described by the publishers as an "unforgettable masterpiece" and a "timeless classic" – an overstatement, surely, although the original novella which gives the book its title did win a Nebula Award in 1975.) 1st January 1998.

Besher, Alexander. **Mir**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-531-2, ix+306pp, B-format (approx.) paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1998; involving "epidermal programming" and sentient tattoos, this is a second novel by an American writer ["born in China to White Russian parents and raised in Japan"] whose first book [1994] was entitled *Rim*; what will his third novel be called – *Mri*?) 15th January 1998.

Blaylock, James P. **All the Bells on Earth**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00490-3, 365pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Jude Palencar, \$6.50. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) December 1997.

Bruce, Wilson. **The Workyrie**. Marionette Books [1 Hutton Close, South Church, Bishop Auckland, County Durham DL14 6XB], ISBN 1-84039-003-4, 139pp, small-press paperback, £6.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; evidently a debut novel, by a

new British writer [born "in the 1950s"] who works as an accountant; Marionette Books announce themselves as a "new name in quality fiction" but their address sounds suspiciously familiar – in fact it's the same as that for Pentland Press, who published Isabel Contreras's *The Happy Halo* [1996] and many other books.) No date shown: received in December 1997.

Butcher, Lionel. **Centaurus Triangle**. Marionette Books [1 Hutton Close, South Church, Bishop Auckland, County Durham DL14 6XB], ISBN 1-84039-006-9, 255pp, trade paperback, cover by Kirsty Butcher, £8.95. (Sf novel, first edition; evidently a debut novel, by a new but not young British writer [born 1941] who has a scientific background.) No date shown: received in December 1997.

Calder, Richard. **Cythera**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-18074-8, vii+311pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Calder's fourth novel, this is an expansion of his *Interzone* story "The Embarkation for Cythera" [issue 106]; apparently a British edition is due from Little, Brown/Orbit.) April 1998.

Calder, Richard. **Dead Girls, Dead Boys, Dead Things**. St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-18078-0, 407pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition; proof copy received; the three novels were published originally in the UK, 1992, 1994 and 1996; the seed stories from which they grew, "Mosquito" and "The Lilim," appeared in *Interzone* issues 32 and 34.) March 1998.

Cole, Allan. **Wolves of the Gods**. "Book Two of *Tales of the Timuras*." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40179-4, 387pp, trade paperback, cover by Stephen Hickman, \$13. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) March 1998.

Date, S. V. **Final Orbit**. Avon, ISBN 0-380-79625-2, 342pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf technothriller, first edition; it's a debut novel by an American journalist [his name is given as Shirish V. Date in the copyright

statement] familiar with NASA matters; it's aimed at the mainstream audience, and Martin Cruz Smith commends it on the front cover.) December 1997.

De Lint, Charles. **Yarrow: An Autumn Tale**. "A Modern Classic of Urban Myth and Magic." Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-86393-4, 255pp, trade paperback, cover by John Howe, \$12.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1986.) 18th December 1997.

Dickson, Gordon R. **The Dragon and the Djinn**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00495-4, 387pp, A-format paperback, cover by Den Beauvais, \$6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; sixth in the long-drawn-out series comprising *The Dragon and the George* [1976], *The Dragon Knight* [1990], *The Dragon on the Border* [1992], *The Dragon at War* [1993] and *The Dragon, the Earl and the Troll* [1994]; a seventh, *The Dragon and the Gnarly King*, has since appeared as a Tor hardcover.) 1st January 1998.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **Modern Classics of Fantasy**. St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-16931-0, xxiii+646pp, trade paperback, cover by James Gurney, \$15.95. (Fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1997; an attractive gathering, with reprint stories ranging from 1939 to 1996; contributors include Poul Anderson, Peter S. Beagle, Terry Bisson, James P. Blaylock, Suzy McKee Charnas, John Crowley, Avram Davidson, L. Sprague de Camp, Damon Knight, R. A. Lafferty, Tanith Lee, Ursula Le Guin, Fritz Leiber, Keith Roberts, Lucius Shepard, Bruce Sterling, Thomas Burnett Swann, Michael Swanwick, Jack Vance, Manly Wade Wellman, T. H. White, Gene Wolfe, Jane Yolen and Roger Zelazny; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 117.) *Late entry: 13th November publication, received in December 1997.*

Dozois, Gardner, and Sheila Williams, eds. **Isaac Asimov's Christmas**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00491-1, viii+230pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, \$5.99. (Sf

anthology, first edition; stories on a Christmas theme culled from Asimov's *SF Magozine*, 1984-1995; authors include the late great Dr Asimov himself, Cynthia Felice, Alexander Jablokov, Janet Kagan, Jack McDevitt, Michael Swanwick and Connie Willis, among others.) *December 1997.*

Evans, A. C. **Space Opera.** Illustrated by the author. Foreword and afterword [i.e. an interview with the poet] by Steve Sneyd. Stride Publications [11 Sylvan Rd., Exeter, Devon EX4 6EW], ISBN 1-900152-00-2, 38pp, paperback, £4.99. (5f poetry chapbook, first edition; this poem-sequence was originally published in a collection called *The Serendipity Coper*, 1986.) No date shown: received in *December 1997.*

Gelman, Peter. **Flying Saucers Over Hennepin: A Novel About an Avenue.** Permeable Press [47 Noe St., #4, San Francisco, CA 94114-1017, USA], ISBN 1-882633-24-5, 196pp, trade paperback, \$11. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; for the benefit of non-Americans, or indeed those who don't live in Minnesota, the "Hennepin" of the title is a district of Minneapolis; this book, along with other titles from the same small-press publisher, is distributed in Britain at £8.95 postpaid by BBR, PO Box 625, Sheffield S1 3GY [cheques payable to Chris Reed].) No date shown: received in *December 1997.*

Goodkind, Terry. **Blood of the Fold: Book Three of the Sword of Truth.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 0-75280-666-1, 698pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Murphy, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 119.) *29th December 1997.*

Goodkind, Terry. **Temple of the Winds.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-506-0, 528pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is "Book Four of *The Sword of Truth*," although the British publishers seem

reluctant to tell us so; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 128.) *29th December 1997.*

Gordon, Joan, and Veronica Hollinger, eds. **Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture.** Foreword by Brian Aldiss. University of Pennsylvania Press, ISBN 0-8122-1628-8, xi+264pp, trade paperback, cover by John M. Digby, \$16.50. (Collection of essays on vampirism in fiction, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$36.50 [not seen]; it contains essays by Nina Auerbach, Suzy McKee Charnas, Jewelle Gomez, Mari Kotani, Rob Latham, Brian Stableford and others; an academically serious volume, it looks to be interesting, and it's available in Britain at £16.50 from Academic and University Publishers Group, 1 Gower St., London WC1E 6HA.) No date shown: received in *December 1997.*

Heinlein, Robert A. **Starship Troopers.** New English Library, ISBN 0-450-00573-9, 222pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (5f novel, first published in the USA, 1959; a Hugo Award-winner, and the book which kicked off the whole sub-genre of "military sf"; this is the 13th NEL printing and has a movie tie-in cover.) *15th January 1998.*

Hemingson, Michael. **Minstrels.** Permeable Press [47 Noe St., #4, San Francisco, CA 94114-1017, USA], ISBN 1-882633-23-7, 148pp, trade paperback, \$10. (5f [?] novel, first edition; distributed in Britain at £7.95 postpaid by BBR, PO Box 625, Sheffield S1 3GY [cheques payable to Chris Reed].) No date shown: received in *December 1997.*

Hobb, Robin. **Ship of Magic: Live Ship Traders, Book 1.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-10324-5, xiv+685pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the beginning of a new series, apparently not related to the author's previous "Far-seer Trilogy"; "Robin Hobb" is a pseudonym for Megan Lindholm.) *9th March 1998.*

Hoh, Diane. **Monster.** "Nightmare Hall." Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-19500-X, 167pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994; it's "copyright Barbara Steiner.") *December 1997.*

Jacoby, Kate. **Exile's Return: First Book of Elia.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06527-3, 442pp, hardcover, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author is an apparently pseudonymous peripatetic Australian, and this appears to be her first novel: it's copyright "Tracey Oliphant, 1998.") *5th March 1998.*

Kenyon, Kay. **Leap Point.** Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-57682-8, 406pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (5f novel, first edition; proof copy received; according to the blurb Kenyon is the author of a previous sf novel, *The Seeds of Time* [an old John Wyndham title], which we don't recall seeing.) *9th March 1998.*

King, Gabriel. **The Wild Road.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42302-X, x+365pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Animal fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1997; proof copy received; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 126; "Gabriel King" is a pseudonym for M. John Harrison and Jane Johnson) *March 1998.*

LaBan, Terry, Peter Hogan and Alisa Kwitney. **The Dreaming: Beyond the Shores of Night.** Illustrated by Peter Snejbjerg, Steve Parkhouse, Michael Zulli and others. Titan, ISBN 1-85286-904-6, 208pp, large-format paperback, cover by Dave McKean, £12.99. (Fantasy graphic collection; first published in eight parts by DC Comics in the USA, 1996-97; this is the first post-Neil Gaiman extension of the "Sandman" mythos, and Gaiman is credited as "Consultant.") *20th February 1998.*

McCaffrey, Anne. **The Masterharper of Pern.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03776-6, 396pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Weston, £15.99. (5f

novel, first published in the USA, 1998; the latest "Dragonriders" book – the most successful planetary-romance series of our time, now that its main competition, Marion Zimmer Bradley's "Darkover" series, seems to have faded from view [in Britain at any rate].) *15th January 1998.*

May, Julian. **Perseus Spur: An Adventure of the Rampart Worlds.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224623-6, 310pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Bradbury, £16.99. (5f novel, first published in the USA [?], 1998; the subtitle on the cover reads "The Rampart Worlds: Book 1"; it looks like space opera.) *2nd February 1998.*

Moorcock, Michael. **Fabulous Harbors.** Avon, ISBN 0-380-79543-4, 228pp, B-format paperback, cover by Bill Binger, \$12. (5f/fantasy collection, first published in the UK, 1995; it's dedicated to "Ackroyd & Sinclair, Master Brewers"; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 102.) *Late entry: 5th November publication, received in December 1997.*

Neilson, Robert. **Without Honour.** Illustrated by Alan Casey. Introduction by Maggie Furey. Albedo One Publications [2 Post Rd., Lusk, Co. Dublin, Ireland], no ISBN shown, 84pp, paperback, £3.50 [Irish pounds, presumably]. (Horror/fantasy collection, first edition; it's the fourth in a "Showcase" series of stapled chapbooks published by Albedo 1, Ireland's leading small-press sf/fantasy magazine; we saw the first in this series, *Broken Heroes* by David Murphy, a few years ago, but don't recall seeing volumes two and three.) No date shown: received in *December 1997.*

Osborne, Cary. **Death-weave.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00498-9, 296pp, A-format paperback, cover by Royo, \$5.99. (5f novel, first edition; another militarist-royalist dynastic romance, by the looks of it – compare Rick Shelley's *Return to Comerein* [below]; does Ace Books, or the American sf reading public, have a particular thing these days about kings and



queens in outer space?) 1st January 1998.

Pini, Wendy and Richard.

**Captives of Blue Mountain.** "Elfquest." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00492-X, 231pp.

A-format paperback, cover by the authors, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; third in a trilogy which began with *Journey to Sorrow's End* and *The Quest Begins*; the authors are well-known fantasy artists as well as writers [primarily in the comics field], although this volume is unillustrated.) December 1997.

Prill, David. **Second Coming Attractions.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-18173-6, 248pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Humorous horror [?] novel, first edition; proof copy received; a third book by this American author whose first two, *The Unnatural* and *Serial Killer Days*, both gained some praise; this one is a lunatic "Hollywood novel" about the making of a religious movie.) March 1998.

Reaves, Michael. **Voodoo Child.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85608-3, 350pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) March 1998.

Reid, Robin Anne. **Arthur C. Clarke: A Critical Companion.** "Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-29529-8, xi+205pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Critical primer on the leading sf writer; first published in the USA, 1997; this is the American first edition with a British price, distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU; it's bang up to date, containing a chapter on *3001: The Final Odyssey* [1997]; however, it takes rather an odd approach overall in that it begins its critical jog-trot through Clarke's oeuvre with *Rendezvous with Rama* [1973]: there is no extended discussion of the earlier books.) Late entry: July publication, received in December 1997.

Robinson, Frank M. **The Dark Beyond the Stars.** "Lambda Literary Award Win-

ner." Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-86624-0, viii+408pp, trade paperback, cover by John Harris, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 52; according to the publisher's accompanying publicity, this generation-starship tale – with an "alternate sexuality" sub-text – by an old-time writer [author of *The Power*, filmed in 1967, etc] is "now in development by Francis Ford Coppola!") January 1998.

Sawyer, Robert J. **Illegal Alien.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00476-8, 292pp, hardcover, cover by Danilo Ducak, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; it's a sort of courtroom mystery with alien visitors in the dock.) 1st December 1997.

Sawyer, Robert J. **Illegal Alien.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648319-4, 319pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997 – not "1998" as it states inside.) 19th January 1998.

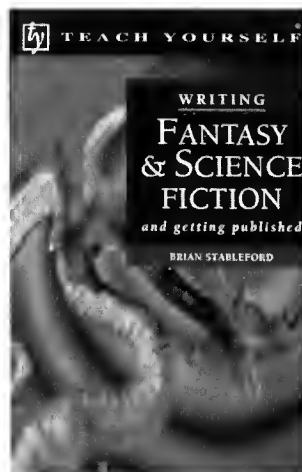
Scott, Melissa, and Lisa A. Barnett. **The Armor of Light.** NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0809, USA], ISBN 1-915368-29-3, 396pp, hardcover, cover by Margaret Organ-Kean, \$23. (Alternative-history fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; this is an example of "Elizabethan Steampunk," involving Christopher Marlowe and Sir Philip Sidney, neither of whom died an early death in this timeline; it's described by David G. Hartwell on the back cover as "one of the best fantasy novels of the 1980s, and worth a serious re-read now"; it was originally published as a paperback original, so this is the first hardcover edition.) January 1998.

Shatner, William. **Tek Kill.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00489-X, 273pp, A-format paperback, cover by Donato Giancola, \$6.99. (Sf/crime novel, first published in the USA, 1996; eighth in the series, it was ghostwritten by Ron Goulart, as Shatner more or less admits in his usual jokey prefatory note: "I'd like to dedicate this book to Ron Goulart.

Mining the words out of a rich vein of plot ... he toils in unrecognized effort. Hail to you, Ronald, a writer of minor physique but of major talent.") 1st December 1997.

Shelley, Rick. **Return to Camerein.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00496-2, 330pp, A-format paperback, cover by Dave Dorman, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; space-operatic, royalist, dynastic-romance sequel to *The Buchanan Campaign* and *The Fires of Coventry*; it's dedicated "to the memory of Diana, Princess of Wales" – good grief.) 1st January 1998.

Spencer, John and Anne. **Alien Contact.** "Sci-Fi Channel True Life Encounters." Orion Media, ISBN 0-75281-217-3, 313pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Pseudo-science/ufology text, first edition; this is one of a series of books to be published under the aegis of the Sci-Fi Channel and "under the guidance of the renowned ufologist John Spencer"; two others we have been sent are *UFO Sightings* by Alan Baker and *Unexplained Natural Phenomena* by Keith Tutt, both priced at £9.99; despite the "sci-fi" label, we are not sure of the relevance of these books to *Interzone* or to science fiction.) 10th December 1997.



Stableford, Brian. **Writing Fantasy & Science Fiction, and Getting Published.** "Teach Yourself." Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-70172-2, 168pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (Writers' "how-to" book, first edition; this replaces the author's earlier *The Way to Write Science Fiction* [Elm Tree,

1989], although in fact it's a completely different work; it's based in part on an excellent series of essays which Stableford has contributed to *The New York Review of SF* over the past few years; recommended.) No date shown: received in December 1997.

Tessier, Thomas. **Fog Heart.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-18098-5, 319pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1997 [not "1998" as it states inside]; proof copy received; reviewed by Chris Morgan in *Interzone* 120.) 9th February 1998.

Vance, Jack. **Ports of Call.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85801-9, 300pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's a new "Gaeon Reach" adventure – see the associated non-fiction item by Michael Andre-Driussi listed under "Spinoffery," below.) April 1998.

Verne, Jules. **Paris in the Twentieth Century.** Translated by Richard Howard. Introduction by Eugen Weber. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42039-X, xxvii+222pp, B-format paperback, cover by Mark Burkhardt, \$11.95. (Sf novel, first published in France, 1994; this translation originally published in the USA, 1996; at last we get to see this book, whose existence startled sf academia a few years ago; has there been a British edition? – not to our knowledge, alas; about the tribulations of a young poet in a mechanistic dystopia, it was written in 1863, put to one side at the insistence of Verne's editor, and rediscovered in a family safe over a hundred years later; it is the famed author's only genuine futuristic novel: all his best-known books were set in the present day, while a few later futuristic tales were largely written by his son, Michel [who presumably saw no potential in this unpublished work of his father's]; of course it's a flawed novel – cranky, pessimistic and sentimental – but, as Ray Bradbury says in a back-cover quote, it is "an absolute necessity ... for anyone interested in the history of speculative fiction.") Late entry: 1st

November publication, received in December 1997.

Zelazny, Roger, ed. **The Williamson Effect.** Introduction by David Brin. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86395-0, 349pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf

Anderson, Kevin J. **The Illustrated Star Wars Universe.** Illustrated by Ralph McQuarrie and others. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50665-X, 208pp, very large-format paperback, £12.99. (Copiously illustrated guide to various imaginary worlds and creatures in the universe of the *Star Wars* sf movies conceived by producer-director George Lucas; first published in the USA, 1995.) December [?] 1997.

Andre-Driussi, Michael. **Vance Space: A Rough Guide to the Planets of Alastor Cluster, the Gaeen Reach, the Oikumene, & Other Exotic Sectors from the Science Fiction of Jack Vance.** Sirius Fiction [PO Box 460430, San Francisco, CA 94146-0430, USA], no ISBN, 52pp, paperback stapled booklet, \$5 [plus \$1 inland USA, or \$3 overseas, postage and packing]. (Chap-book companion, organized in A-Z fashion with a centre-spread star-map, to the imaginary worlds in Jack Vance's sf novels; first edition; no doubt it's a genuine contribution to knowledge, and should appeal strongly to Vance fans, but there's a painful contrast between this little black-and-white self-published fannish item and all the lavish "Star Wars" spinoff books listed elsewhere in this column: that contrast goes to show where the money is in today's sf world – alas, it doesn't reside with respected veteran writers like Mr Vance, or his dogged admirers.) 1st December 1997.

Anghelides, Peter. **Kursaal.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40578-3, 282pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition.) 5th January 1998.

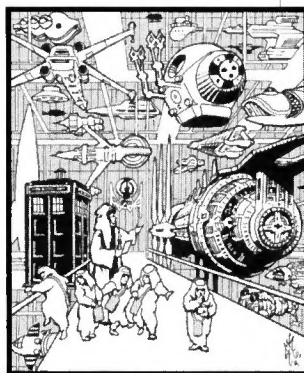
Bouzereau, Laurent, ed. **Star Wars: The Annotated Screenplays.** Titan, ISBN 1-85286-923-2, x+320pp, C-for-

anthology, first published in the USA, 1996; all-new stories in honour of Jack Williamson by Poul Anderson, Ben Bova, John Brunner, Jane Lindskold [Zelazny's companion of his later years, who completed the editorial work on this vol-

ume], Andre Norton, Frederik Pohl, Mike Resnick, Fred Saberhagen, Connie Willis and others; happily, Williamson [born 1908] is still alive and writing, but it's sadly ironic that the editor of this *festschrift* [born 1937] should

## Spinoffery

*This is a list of all baaks received that fall into these sub-types of sf, fantasy and harrar which may be termed navelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and share-craps (including nan-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinaffery" is used far the sake of brevity.*



mat paperback, £12.99. (Collection of screenplays by George Lucas, Leigh Brackett and Lawrence Kasdan for the sf movies in Lucas's *Star Wars* trilogy; first published in the USA, 1997; the annotations refer to various drafts, and show how the scripts developed.) 6th March 1998.

Bulis, Christopher. **Tempest.** "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20523-5, 265pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Elson, £4.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, featuring the galactic adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of Doctor Who]; first edition.) 15th January 1998.

Emerson, Ru. **The Huntress and the Sphinx.** "Xena: Warrior Princess." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-651151-1, 226pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; it's based on the pseudo-Greek mythological series [a companion to *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*] created by John Schulian and Robert Tapert for Universal Television.) 5th January 1998.

Emerson, Ru. **The Thief of Hermes.** "Xena: Warrior Princess." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-651152-X, 230pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; based on the Universal

TV series created by John Schulian and Robert Tapert.) 5th January 1998.

Gannett, Lewis. **Gehenna.** "Millennium, 2." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648338-0, 249pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror TV-series spinoff novel [?], first published in the USA, 1997; based on the Fox TV series created by Chris Carter; it's not absolutely clear whether this is a script novelization or a spinoff.) 5th January 1998.

Henderson, Mary. **Star Wars: The Magic of Myth.** "Companion volume to the exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50705-2, vii+214pp, very large-format paperback, £12.99. (Copiously illustrated study of the *mythas* of the *Star Wars* sf movies conceived by producer-director George Lucas; first published in the USA, 1997; as the cover strapline tells us, it's a tie-in to a recent Smithsonian exhibition, written by the exhibition's curator; according to the publisher's blurb, it "includes art that illustrates the mythological archetypes, creatures, and heroes whose stories echo those of Luke Skywalker..." and it "also includes images from historical and cultural events that infused the *Star Wars* saga, from medieval quest tales to

have died before the book appeared – likewise one of its leading contributors, John Brunner, who was nearer Zelazny's age than Williamson's.) 15th December 1997.

the aerial dogfights of World War II"; this is the American first edition with a British ISBN and price sticker.) 11th December 1997.

McIntee, David A. **The Face of the Enemy.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40580-5, 281pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition.) 5th January 1998.

Orman, Kate. **Walking to Babylon.** "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20521-9, 257pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Salwowski, £4.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, featuring the galactic adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of Doctor Who]; first edition; this one features time-travel to the ancient city of the title.) 19th February 1998.

Sammon, Paul M. **The Making of Starship Troopers.** Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-64461-7, vii+152pp, very large-format paperback, £9.99. (Copiously illustrated companion to the recent sf movie, based on Robert A. Heinlein's Hugo-winning 1959 novel and directed by Paul Verhoeven; first published in the USA, 1997.) 5th January 1998.

Smith, Bill. **Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Weapons and Technology.** Illustrated by David Nakabayashi and Troy Vigil. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-41413-6, xvii+213pp, very large-format paperback, \$18. (Illustrated guide to the imaginary weapons and other devices in the *Star Wars* sf-movie series created by George Lucas; first edition; a follow-up to the same author's *Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Vehicles and Vessels* [1996].) Late entry: 1st November publication, received in December 1997.



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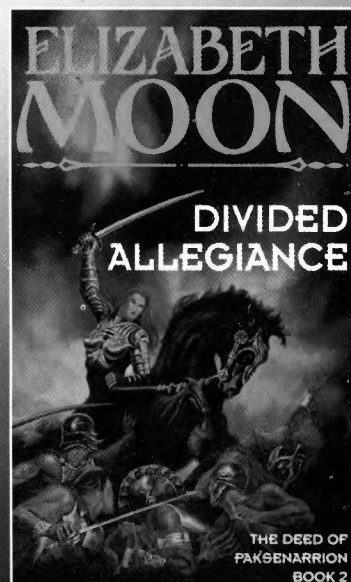
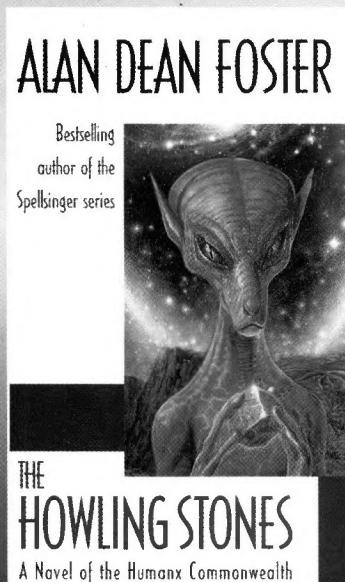
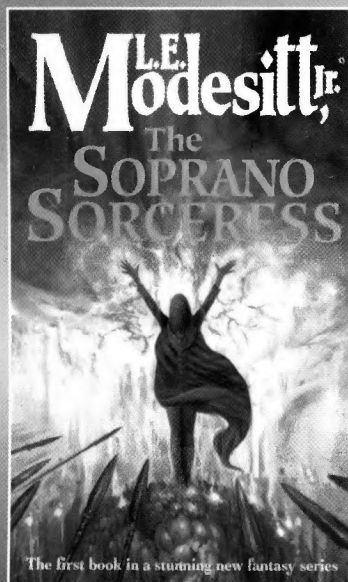
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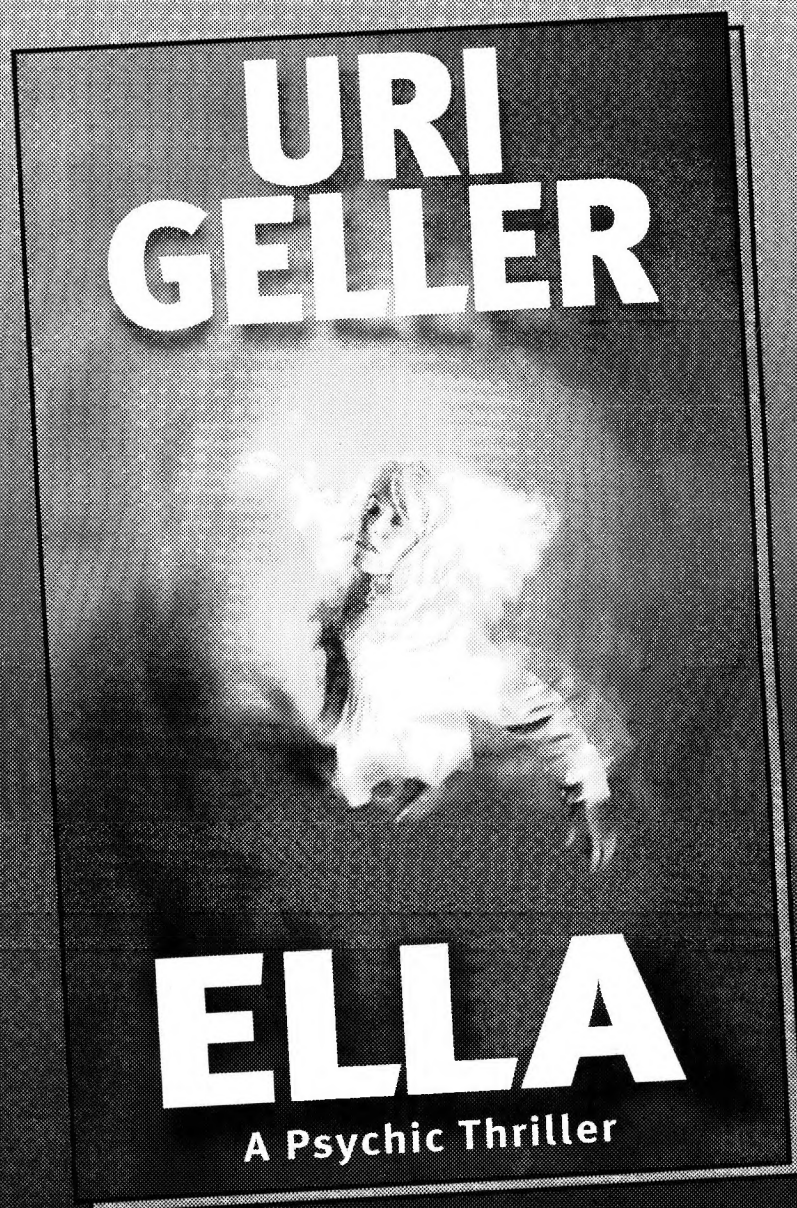
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